

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
Santa Barbara

A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE:  
NECROGRAPHIES OF HIP-HOP IN CONTEMPORARY DETROIT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Music

By

William Alexander Blue V

Committee in Charge:

Professor David Novak, Chair

Professor George Lipsitz

Professor Stephanie Batiste

Professor Gaye Theresa Johnson, UCLA

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The dissertation of William Alexander Blue V is approved.

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George Lipsitz

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Stephanie Batiste

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Gaye Theresa Johnson

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David Novak, Chair

June 2021

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## VITA OF ALEX BLUE V

June 2021

### EDUCATION

Bachelor of Music in Trombone Performance, Texas Tech University 2008  
Master of Music in Jazz Studies, University of North Texas 2013  
Doctor of Philosophy in Music, University of California, Santa Barbara 2021

### PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2021- , Assistant Professor, Department of Music, College of William and Mary  
2019-2021, Thurgood Marshall Fellow, Program in African/African American Studies, Dartmouth College  
2018-2019, Predoctoral Teaching Fellow, Department of Music, Ithaca College  
2015-2016, Teaching Associate, Department of Music, UC Santa Barbara  
2013-2014, Teaching Assistant, Department of Black Studies, UC Santa Barbara  
2011-2013, Teaching Fellow, Department of Music, University of North Texas

### PUBLICATIONS

“You’re Only Ever A Block From The ‘Hood: Hip-Hop and Spatial Reorientation in Detroit, Michigan.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Forthcoming  
“Ain’t It Funny? Danny Brown, Black Subjectivity, and the Performance of Neurosis.” A *Poetics of Neurosis: Cultural Narratives of Mental Disability*, 2018  
“Hear What You Want: Sonic Politics, Blackness, and Racism-Canceling Headphones.” *Current Musicology*, 2017

### RELEVANT HONORS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Dartmouth College Thurgood Marshall Fellowship 2019-2021  
Ithaca College Predoctoral Fellowship 2018-2019  
UC Consortium for Black Studies in California Research Grant 2018  
University of California Graduate Opportunity Fellowship 2016-2017  
AMS Howard Mayer Brown Fellowship Finalist (Special Designation) 2016  
University of California Graduate Opportunity Fellowship 2014-2015

### FIELDS OF STUDY

Hip-Hop  
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## ABSTRACT

A Matter of Death and Life: Necrographies of Hip-Hop in Contemporary Detroit

By

Alex Blue V

This dissertation is a necrographic study of how musicians in Detroit's hip-hop scene respond to various narratives of death and dying *about* Detroit and *in* Detroit, how they might use a supposedly dead city as inspiration, how they create from seemingly dead spaces, and how all of these things are colored by both race and place. My research orbits around narratives of death and dying and numerous ways they are addressed by Black Detroiters; I am primarily interested in responses to various forms of death and dying through the creation and consumption of hip-hop. As this project shows, studying Detroit hip-hop can help us understand more deeply the ways in which Black people navigate, respond to, and live with the various forms of death that are prematurely forced upon us in the US and around the world. I make use of various methods to interpret the myriad ways both practitioners and participants in Detroit use the creation, performance, and consumption of hip-hop for identity formation and reification in a rapidly-changing city. This project is the first ethnomusicological work on Detroit hip-hop, contributes to a growing Black studies intervention into ethnomusicology, and offers new insights into the connections between sound, race, and death in Detroit and beyond.

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# Introduction

Detroit has long been described in morbid, corporeal, and sometimes supernatural terms. A decades-long erosion of the city's population and tax base due to causes ranging from automobile plant closures, to privatization of public services, to predatory lending and foreclosure practices, led to the city being pronounced dead, or considered a dying, abandoned *ghost town*. More recent mediated descriptions of the city speak of its perceived post-bankruptcy triumphs and use language like *revitalization*, *renaissance*, *rebirth*, and *resurrection*; all of this postmortem language entrenches the prior narratives of the dead city. Left behind in both the stories of dead city and city reborn is an acknowledgment of Detroit's Black - and to a lesser extent, poor, working-class white, or working-class non-white citizens - as living, breathing humans that take up space. These Black Detroiters who remained living, working, and surviving in the city were not considered vital enough for the city to be viewed as living; this is unsurprising, given the associations between Blackness, nonhumanity, violence, and death that have been continuously reinscribed in the US through chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, and the ongoing extrajudicial, state sponsored murders of Black people. The expendability of Black life is the thread that connects these atrocities. At the same time, Black Detroit has remained largely ignored during the city's resurgence, with Black life increasingly pushed to the city's margins to make room for various gentrification projects.

Amid the noisy narratives of a dead city and a resurrected city stands a robust, growing, stylistically diverse Detroit hip-hop scene, made up of numerous elements including rappers, producers, beatmakers, fans, promoters, and venues. The fragmented,

spatially disjunct nature of the city has led to a Detroit that is more discursively bound than geographically connected, and the same can be said for the various actors in Detroit hip-hop. Yet, despite a lack of spatial connectedness, they are bound by place, by their identity as Detroiters. Hip-hop has long been understood as Black music due to its primarily Black origins, its mostly Black performers, a reliance on Black vernacular and Black musical practices, etc. To that end, hip-hop is viewed as representative of Black voices, considered the “voice of the streets.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview with ABC News, Detroit rapper and activist Royce da 5’9” states that hip-hop has always filled the void when it comes to a lack of discussions on race, racism, brutality, and disenfranchisement in the US. According to Royce, “[hip-hop] was that voice that America couldn’t control...it was that voice of the streets that they didn’t know what the next line is gonna be and that scared them (Zaru and Brown 2020).” The fear, he continues, came because “we spoke our own unapologetic truth. We spoke about environments that were overlooked, that didn’t have a voice, you know, that didn’t have a say, that didn’t have pretty much anything (ibid).”

The imposed connection between Blackness, nonhumanity, violence, and death that has been manufactured through systemic racism and contributes to Detroit being viewed as dead city can also be observed within the world of hip-hop, creating an ouroboros wherein the music is informed by these themes and the themes are continuously reinscribed by the music. Typical hip-hop origin stories place the music squarely within the crucible of “inner city”<sup>3</sup> Black and brown life, forged out of death, darkness, and dire straits – it is common to

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<sup>1</sup> While Black people are not a monolith, it has become common, rightly or not, to use urban geographic language as a shorthand for talking about people of color, especially Black people. ‘The streets’ and ‘the block’ are a few examples of terms that are somewhat nondescript yet used as shorthand for Black.

<sup>3</sup> This term is primarily a rhetorical device that refers not to a specific geographic location, but to the presence of lower income Black and Brown people. Ironically, many of these areas are on the margins of various cities,

hear that hip-hop developed as a means for youth to escape street life and gang warfare in the Bronx. In this space, I do not wish to complicate this genesis story; rather, I find it important to highlight that these themes remain pervasive in the music, signaling a continuation of the conditions that are credited with birthing the music in the first place. The understanding of hip-hop as Black representative voice, combined with narratives of Detroit as dead city and the dismissal of Black life as evidence of city life, led me to my research questions. In this project I set out to understand how musicians in Detroit's hip-hop scene respond to various narratives of death and dying *about* Detroit and *in* Detroit, how they might use a supposedly dead city as inspiration, how they create from seemingly dead spaces, and how all of these things are colored by both race and place. Studying Detroit hip-hop can help us understand more deeply the ways in which Black people navigate, respond to, and live with the various forms of death that are prematurely forced upon us in the US and around the world.

My research orbits around narratives of death and dying and numerous ways they are addressed by Black Detroiters; I am primarily interested in responses to various forms of death and dying through the creation and consumption of hip-hop. I am not suggesting that hip-hop is the only means through which people respond to these narratives, nor am I suggesting it is the best way (if such a thing can even be measured). What I observed, and have continued to observe, was/is several people participating in hip-hop to this end, which suggests that hip-hop is seen as a productive means for response. Additionally, I am not making the argument that all who participate in the Detroit hip-hop scene are interested in or oriented towards the issues of death, dying, gentrification, or Blackness - though I would argue that they are all affected by it. The hip-hop scene of Detroit is far too vast and varied to

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pushed further out from the center by various redevelopment/revitalization projects. "Outer city" might be more accurate.

make such generalizations, but I encountered so many artists, producers, and songs that were somehow attuned to narratives of death and dying in the city that it became imperative to explore.

## **To The Death**

Death is the prominent thread weaving together this study. My orientation towards ‘death’ is slightly informed by its use in Urban Studies, wherein the city is treated as an organism that can live or die depending on various economic, cultural, or political choices made by citizens, companies, and governing bodies. The work of Jane Jacobs (1961) prefigured many subsequent Urban Studies works in its linkages between the urban redevelopment/slum clearances that Jacobs so adamantly opposed, perceived vacancy – phenomena we would now call part of the process of ‘gentrification,’ a term coined by Ruth Glass three years after Jacobs’ important study – and urban/city ‘death’. Her argument that environments the city considered “slums” were important to the life of the city, and not in need of redevelopment so much as they needed support (certainly not a new argument, just a more visible iteration of it), remains the central argument for urban activists and in anti-gentrification scholarship. Vacancy or abandonment as primary signs of death in cities remain pervasive points of view, and a recent turn in Urban Studies scholarship has focused on life in these perceived dead cities, with monographs like Rebecca Kinney’s *Beautiful Wasteland* (2016) and Paul Dobraszczyk’s *The Dead City* (2017) turning an eye towards the sociopolitical aspect of these contested spaces and places, the romanticization of ‘ruins,’ and the monetization of dead city as both economic and cultural capital. I have continued the expansion of this scholarly conversation with this project, often utilizing metaphors of death/deadness/dying to interpret various places and spaces within Detroit and using various depictions of a dead

Detroit as grounding for analysis. But much of my orientation towards death comes from scholarship within the Black Studies tradition.

I am indebted to several conceptualizations of death in relation to Black life and being from within Black Studies scholarship, including but not limited to:

- Christina Sharpe's theorization of *the wake* and her invocation of *non/being* (2016), wherein the wake, akin to that left behind a traveling ship, represents the reverberations, lingering effects, and afterlives of chattel slavery pervasive within the African diaspora, and non/being represents the liminal state of Black subjectivity, not dead but not recognized as living/being in an anti-Black world.
- Hortense Spillers' *body/flesh* dialectic (1987), wherein the 'flesh' represents the unmarked, peripheral subject who is constantly ripped of their subjecthood and exists outside of ideology, and the 'body' is flesh with dominant ideology thrust upon it, thus granted subjecthood through the recognition as being that comes from participation in dominant ideology.
- Orlando Patterson's *social death* (1982), which refers to a position of alienation and a lack of recognition as fully human that is forced upon people through oppressive systems like chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and apartheid. As Abdul JanMohamed notes (2005: 16), social death marks both the lack of any sociopolitical presence within the enslaver's society, and the ability to be physically killed without one's death being considered a homicide, transgressive, or sacrilegious in any way.
- Abdul R. JanMohamed's *death-bound-subject* (2005), which describes a subjectivity that is formed by and oriented to the world through the constant presence and threat of death, or a population coerced into subjectivity through the threat of death.

These various orientations toward death from both Urban Studies and Black Studies can be observed throughout this project, and my moments of theorization are possible because of these prior works.

## **Motor City Music**

As written on the dust jacket of Suzanne Smith's 1999 monograph *Dancing In The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, “Detroit in the 1960s was a city with a pulse: people were marching in step with Martin Luther King, Jr., dancing in the street with Martha and the Vandellas, and facing off with city police. Through it all, Motown provided the beat.” Beginning in the 1960s, Motown Records became the city's proudest musical statement, a thrilling example of Black success, working class aspirations, and crossover appeal – musically and racially. But as Smith notes throughout her work, though Motown has been granted much attention as a cultural phenomenon and a business enterprise, little attention has been given to Detroit's place in the creation of Motown records, or to the political and cultural climates in 1960s Detroit that would have undoubtedly influenced the company. In fact, the record company's place in the creation of the city has been more frequently explored - 'Motown' still serves as a metonym for Detroit, though the label relocated to Los Angeles in the early 1970s. Motown was clearly not the only style of Detroit music heavily influenced by the city and cultural climate. Many blues musicians worked on automobile assembly lines during the day, including John Lee Hooker and Joe L. Carter – Carter's most well-known song, “Please, Mr. Foreman” (1968) features Carter imploring the plant foreman to “slow down [the] assembly line,” stating “you know I don't mind working, Lord, but I do mind dying!” Motown's founder, Berry Gordy Jr., was an aspiring songwriter who worked at an automobile plant to support his family before taking the leap and starting

his company – he took inspiration from assembly lines and the self-sufficient nature of automobile plants to create the well-oiled, hit-creating machine of Motown Records. Rock 'n' roll has also secured a permanent seat at the vaunted table of Detroit music, seeing a surge in popularity near the end of the 1960s and extending into the next decade. The city's bands reveled in the tough, gritty image associated with Detroit, beginning to model themselves after that image, the history of machinery, and the success of Motown (Carson 2006).

Other styles saw their birth, or at least a burst of popularity, in the Motor City: funk, hardcore, and techno. Techno has garnered comparisons to an assembly line aesthetic, though journalist Dan Sicko would argue otherwise. According to Sicko, techno took off in Detroit because of a quiet environment in the city's post-industrial condition that allowed for nuances to grow (Sicko 2010). He writes:

Techno is also in some ways a contrary reaction to Detroit, rather than merely a sum of its influences. Within the city's African American community was a generation of young adults looking to escape the legacies of Berry Gordy and George Clinton, or maybe already detecting conservative and formulaic tendencies in black radio. When the time came for these kids' inevitable teenage rebellion, they turned away from R&B and looked instead to Kraftwerk and other European artists (Sicko 2010: 11).

Building upon an established practice of exploring musical styles with attention given to the city's influence, I turn the focus to Detroit hip-hop, revealing a continuation of a tradition of sounding and place-making in which Detroiters have always engaged. Detroit's history of racial conflict, disinvestment, and seismic shifts in space have led to a musical culture unlike any other. The shadows of past and present housing discrimination loom large and the departure of major industries, coupled with the epidemic of white flight, have unveiled a city that is now roughly 80% Black.

Detroit is also one of the most segregated large cities in the US. The force known as gentrification has complicated who can afford to live in neighborhoods that were traditionally populated by black people – as new businesses are built in formerly empty locations and housing is built or rehabilitated by investors, property values begin to rise, and some long-time residents are displaced after not being able to keep up with property taxes or rent. Additionally, the low population in comparison to the large amount of open space reveals a city that is geographically fragmented and has frequently been pronounced dead. I argue that the conditions of the city, and this deadness, have been more instrumental to Detroit hip-hop's sound, narratives, and proliferation than typical narratives of hip-hop-as-urban would indicate, and that sound, place, and race are inextricably linked in representations of Detroit.

## **Positionality**

Though not always consciously aware of the city, I have been a lifelong fan of Detroit's various musical scenes and have been hearing the city since before I can remember. My first musical memory is of my mother asking me to bring her "that album from over there," which was Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* (1973). We placed the record onto my Sesame Street Fischer-Price record player - a hand-me-down from my older sister - and listened while folding clothes. When "Living For The City" began to play, mama stopped me and told me it was important for me to know the words. Throughout my childhood, the music of the Motor City formed my musical consciousness. I heard the gospel of The Clark Sisters, Fred Hammond, and BeBe and CeCe Winans. A family road trip was never taken without my parents' collection of Motown cassettes, and when we tired of the cassettes, they would turn on the "Oldies" radio station, ensuring that we'd hear more Motown. As I grew into an aspiring rebellious preteen in the late 1990s, I began to listen to more hip-hop, and I began to



listen to punk rock, growing increasingly inspired by the music of Iggy Pop and the Stooges, who formed a short drive away from Detroit in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and MC5, a protopunk band started in the Detroit downriver city of Lincoln Park. At the time, I had no idea their name stood for Motor City Five. I started listening to an energetic, angry, controversial white boy who went by the name Eminem, whose *Slim Shady LP* (1999) came out shortly before I began high school - I'd never heard a rapper from Detroit, to my knowledge. Shortly thereafter, I was listening to Slum Village, whose *Fantastic, Vol. 2* came out on my 15th birthday: June 13, 2000. My undergraduate career kickstarted my obsession with jazz, and I fell in love with the sounds of Kenny Garrett, Pepper Adams, Curtis Fuller, Yusef Lateef, and Thad Jones.<sup>4</sup> In my adult life, I have gravitated toward hip-hop, much like I did as a child. J Dilla, who was a part of Slum Village, began to dominate my airspace as I learned how to make beats. I listened to the frenetic delivery of Danny Brown, the street knowledge of Guilty Simpson, and the smooth collective wordplay of Clear Soul Forces, barely realizing that I was deepening my Detroit sound world yet again.

For the better part of a decade now, I have been asked by various people to explain my doctoral research. Yet no matter the context, whether I am in Detroit or elsewhere, nine times out of ten I am met with the same follow-up question: *why did you pick Detroit??* This general air of incredulity around the topic of Detroit is part of what initially led me to choose it as my field site - I was convinced the city had been given a bad rap and I wanted to remind people just how influential the city has been in the realm of popular music. I was also interested in Detroit because of its financial situation at the start of my doctoral studies in 2013. News of Detroit's struggles and impending bankruptcy declaration was reverberating

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<sup>4</sup> Technically born in Pontiac, Michigan, thirty-five miles north of Detroit

nationally, and the internet became flooded with opinion pieces, blog posts, and vlogs about the city. I felt that something didn't add up about a city so apparently dead and abandoned consistently pumping out music that I loved so intensely.

Though I knew a lot of music from Detroit, I didn't begin my research there until the spring of 2014, when I participated in a conference hosted by the Detroit Sound Conservancy. I presented a paper titled "More than 8 Mile: Illuminating Detroit's Place in the Hip-Hop Narrative" to a roomful of engaged, appreciative listeners in the main branch of the Detroit Public Library. I also got the chance to listen to several papers on various Detroit musical legacies, from the albums recorded at United Sound to the generation-defining radio programs broadcast by a DJ known as The Electrifying Mojo. More importantly than my participation in the conference, my first trip to Detroit showed me a city that I never would have known existed, due to the pervasiveness of mediated accounts of abandonment and deadness surrounding the city. I expected to find a completely run down, empty city. While I did see parts of the city that corresponded to my expectations, what I really encountered was a vibrant city, teeming with life, even in areas that were more deserted than others. I was staying smack dab in the middle of Midtown with a family friend, Jaz. I didn't know at the time that I was in the heart of what would soon become Detroit's gentrification zone. Jaz drove me around and showed me the city that he grew up in, taking me to places like Belle Isle, an island state park larger than New York's Central Park that rests in the Detroit River between Michigan and Ontario, Canada. We drove through neighborhoods on the East Side, where streets lined with well-maintained estates are mere blocks away from crumbling houses and vacant lots. We drove through neighborhoods that had no working street lights. I soon realized my naivete in assuming the entire city was downtrodden. Detroit is more

complicated than that. Beyond the fact that there were wealthy and well-manicured parts of the city that I hadn't imagined, I hadn't considered that even the worse for wear sections of Detroit had people in them. At the time, I did not feel like I saw much middle ground – it seemed that things in Detroit were either really nice or really beat up. I wanted to know which of these two Detroits the music I loved was coming from.

### **Methodologies and Materials: A Matter of Death and Life**

This work is an exploration of and meditation on hip-hop, Blackness, and narratives of death and dying in contemporary Detroit, Michigan, from a perspective of Black studies-driven ethnomusicology. I make use of various methods to interpret the myriad ways both practitioners and participants in Detroit use the creation, performance, and consumption of hip-hop for identity formation and reification in a rapidly-changing city. I argue that as space and place in Detroit are constantly restructured and recoded, people use musical aesthetics, performance, and the cultural knowledge created therein to craft new ways of being, creating, and knowing in Detroit. Studying people and the music in which they participate can teach us numerous things, including what social and cultural values people hold, how people formulate identity, and how they both create and interact with their environment. As previously mentioned, hip-hop has often been framed as a voice of the streets that speaks directly to, and from, the Black experience; it is treated as an inevitability, given the assumed dire conditions of Black urban life. In contrast, my work illuminates hip-hop in Detroit as agential and active rather than pathological or merely necessary for survival. I argue that practitioners deliberately choose to create, consume, and deploy hip-hop for reasons ranging from the aesthetic to the pragmatic. Several scholars have written about Detroit, particularly

concerning issues of race. A few ethnomusicologists<sup>5</sup> have written about music cultures in Detroit, but at this time, work published on the city's hip-hop scene has come from outside of the field of ethnomusicology.<sup>6</sup> Even larger are the respective literatures on both hip-hop and death; the compelling nature of each has led to their widespread discussion across the humanities and STEM fields like psychology and neuroscience. Ethnomusicologists have written about each at length, but studies detailing the explicit connections between the two are not as common (see Rose 1994; Ramsey 2003; Zanfagna 2006). Generally, music studies have not often dealt with hip-hop. There are obvious exceptions, and recent years have seen a growing trend among music theorists and musicologists of studying and writing about hip-hop. Within ethnomusicology, many of the works on hip-hop explore it from a global perspective, rather than a perspective rooted in the Black US. This project is the first ethnomusicological work on Detroit hip-hop, contributes to a growing Black studies intervention into ethnomusicology, and offers new insights into the connections between sound, race, and death in Detroit and beyond.

## **Ethno-graphy?**

I am hesitant to call my project an “ethnography.” Part of this is because of the word's history in the social sciences and the humanities, particularly in anthropology and ethnomusicology, which evokes mental images of the pith helmet-clad scholar explorer, cutting through the brush to “discover” some new culture, become an “expert” in said culture, and write about it in relation to dominant European or US culture. I am also hesitant because of the way that carrying the title of “ethnographer” can place one in a dominant

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Slobin and Anne Rasmussen are the most prominent ethnomusicologists associated with work in Detroit.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the work of media studies/communications scholars Rebekah Farrugia and Kellie D. Hay on women, hip-hop, and community building in Detroit (see Farrugia and Hay 2020)

relationship to the people who are informing their research. As the humanities as a whole face more and more calls to decolonize their practices, I have found it increasingly important to interrogate *my* role in my research, and the roles of my research consultants and interlocutors. While I am implored as a scholar to interpret material, I cannot ignore the ability of my consultants and interlocutors to interpret themselves. Additionally, my subject position is far too intertwined with my research topic for me to claim any sort of scientific objectivity. I am a Black man concerned with the lives and livelihoods of my kinfolk and my skinfolk. Any research into Black issues is research that personally affects me. I am a fan, consumer, and an occasional creator of hip-hop, and a big fan of Detroit hip-hop in particular - it was my love of Detroit hip-hop that inspired my project in the first place. I feel personally invested in the topic. Third, I became personally invested in the city of Detroit during my time living there and remain invested. I taught in Detroit schools, voted in local elections, supported local businesses (particularly Black-owned businesses), tended bar at a warm spot downtown. I attended roundtables on how to improve the city's neighborhoods, marched in anti-gentrification demonstrations, and briefly held a plot in a community garden, where I grew some lovely herbs. After a while, it felt less like I was there doing fieldwork and more like I was just there to live and work in the city like so many other people, and part of my comfort is due to the overwhelmingly Black population of the city and the diversity of that Blackness. Detroit is the only place I've lived as an adult where I didn't feel a nudge to perform any specific type of Blackness at any given time - I felt like I could simply be. My subject position allowed me access to certain conversations, sentiments, and observations that I otherwise would not have had, which is evidence of the personal becoming political in my work.

At the same time, my work contains many ethnographic elements. I identified Detroit as my field site and spent 22 consecutive months as a resident of the city. Before moving there, I traveled there frequently for fieldwork purposes, and I regularly make return trips now that I have moved away. Every chapter contains at least one case study that was formed through my participation in Detroit hip-hop as opposed to my observation of others participating. Apart from being necessary to my gathering of cultural and social data, participant observation was vital to the discourse-centered approach to fieldwork that I wanted to take, relying on data gathered through everyday interactions with people, my attendance and participation at shows and parties, etc. It was through regular attendance at events, time in studios, and late nights at shows that I began to connect some dots between the way people performed, moved, participated with, and listened to hip-hop in Detroit. I oscillated between formal and informal interviews during my sustained time in Detroit - research participants had varying degrees of comfort with being recorded, asked a series of questions, etc. More often than not, I took interview notes by hand when working with interlocutors because I found people were more comfortable being candid when they were not being recorded. There was one strong exception to this, a producer who told me to just have my recorder on any time I was going to meet up with them. I also conducted interviews asynchronously, via text message or email thread. While this had the disadvantage of not getting an instant candid response, it had the advantage of garnering thoughtful responses that could be directly transferable to the page without fear of mishearing or incorrectly transcribing. I also took photographs at events, and shot a considerable amount of video footage, for the purpose of interpreting things like performance practice, crowd interactions, space, and place.

Yet the nature of Detroit, and Detroit hip-hop, made ethnography a far more difficult task than anticipated. Ethnographies are typically deep dives into specific people, cultures, or social groups, with the researcher spending a considerable amount of time with a particular group in order to provide a picture of daily life. As I set out to study a city and a musical scene rather than one specific group within it, it was not possible to do make an ethnography in that sense. Additionally, Detroit is a city that has undergone considerable trauma and loss, leading to a very spatially fragmented city and musical scene - it was not easy to find voices in this space. To that end, many of the events that I attended were pop-up events, or one-off events, offering no ability to get solid data from or follow up with people I would likely never see again. I could not reside with the same group of people and study their culture, then represent a full community a la Steven Feld, and I could not gather substantial sociological data from a single neighborhood, or a single building in a neighborhood, a la Steven Gregory. While there are people who became my go-to contacts in the city, there was not really a way for me to go into the village and find the chief, so to speak, because I am dealing with music that has an ever-expanding scene. Though it was never my goal to begin with, it became clear that I could never represent a full community. One of the results of this research problem is that my voice features prominently throughout the work. When I could not find voices to feature, I had to write about my own experience with various musical performances, recordings, events, etc.

I had to look for data in the gaps, the absences left behind in the spaces between people and the between events. Any possible cultural text was open for my interpretation. I began searching for overarching themes, performance practices, “Detroitisms” that could help me organize my data in a coherent way. After taking a step back from my project to

think about the various stories I'd gathered and things I had experienced, the absences, losses, and traumas felt more like the study object than whatever objects I was searching for. I realized that these things corresponded with the deadness in Detroit that I had spent years trying to disprove. Death became the prevailing theme of my work, and all my data fell into place. This resulted in me creating, to borrow words from John L Jackson, Jr., "a rather phenomenological study dressed up in ethnographic garb" (Jackson 2001: 4). Rather than ethnography, it may make more sense to call this work a "necrography," as death, absences, and loss are truly the organizing force behind my work.

Taken literally, 'necrography' would be to write about death. And that is certainly what I have done. But necrography is a useful way to describe the methodologies that I had to use for my project, which relied on several 'dead' sources. Some of the sources were metaphorically dead - things that are generally considered secondary sources in ethnography like recorded music, music videos, published interviews, etc., could be considered dead sources. In the vein of Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* ([1997] 2008), I chose to follow various absences, ghosts, and hauntings with Detroit hip-hop and find ways to use them as primary source material. Additionally, some of the voices featured in my work belong to fallen members of the Detroit hip-hop scene. I turn to their recorded sounds, stories about them passed on to me from the living, their past interviews, and any other vestiges of them that I can find, in hopes of conjuring their voices to inform my living work.

## **Pathway**

My project follows a route from life into death and the afterlife in Detroit hip-hop. Over the course of five chapters, I trace institutional power, gentrification, policing, identity, environmental neglect, and media representation, with the goal of ascertaining their role in



various forms of Black dying and death - social, spatial, cultural, physical. It is my assertion that a better understanding of Black death can effect positive change in the treatment of Black life. While I draw from various literatures - ethnomusicology, sociology, anthropology, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, etc., it is ultimately my reading of death through Detroit's contemporary hip-hop scene that leads me to my discoveries.

In my first chapter, I investigate the role of arts organizations in 'revitalization,' focused specifically on the Detroit Institute of Arts, or DIA. I examine and critique how the DIA claims a measured stake in the Detroit hip-hop scene and local (Black) community at large, and how members of Detroit's hip-hop scene in turn make various claims over the physical and sonic space of the DIA. The relationships between the DIA and the hip-hop scene - and larger Detroit Black arts scene - are complicated. Because of its role in the Grand Bargain - the name given to the complex series of negotiations that helped the city of Detroit emerge from the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history in 2014 - the DIA was ideologically positioned to take credit for 'reviving' the city. While I draw from multiple fieldwork examples and articles from journals and newspapers, my work in this chapter orbits around two case studies: related performances by Detroit emcee/poet Mic Write that took place in a reclaimed material sculpture park in 2016 and in a DIA courtyard in 2017, and an photo exhibit called *D-Cyphered* that, in the museum's words, aimed to "take viewers on a photographic timeline that makes up the story of the Detroit hip-hop scene" that was on display from August 2017 to February 2018. As many museums and other fine arts organizations nationwide have struggled to recruit new members and donors, sell tickets, and maintain a steady flow of visitors, they have turned more and more to programming things considered popular culture. At their core, the DIA's practices rely on neoliberal logics of

presenting as diverse in order to exploit the labor of people of color and increase profitability. Specifically, the museum attempts these neoliberal practices by using Black sounds and images, via hip-hop, as objects of display. This is what Hortense Spillers or Saidiya Hartman might refer to as “fungibility,” an ontological transformation of Black bodies into exchangeable, interchangeable objects. But as Fred Moten has noted, the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Mic Write’s DIA performance demonstrated the possibilities of laying claims to sonic and physical space within the museum through uncensored Black performance.

My second chapter, “Killing The Noise,” follows this trail of revitalization and gentrification in Detroit into a neighborhood on Detroit’s East Side known as West Village. I begin with a larger discussion of gentrification, and how gentrification has taken place in the Motor City. While typical stories of gentrification (rightly) focus on issues of displacement, I turn the conversation to investigate the increase of low-level policing that often accompanies gentrification in cities. One of the most noticeable effects of gentrification in Detroit has been an uptick in noise complaints, and an even larger uptick in police responding to noise complaints. As my primary case study, I analyze and interpret the buildup and aftermath of police responding heavily to a noise complaint called in against a monthly hip-hop night that occurred at a record store in a gentrifying area of West Village. Noise is an increasingly important category in the policing of Black bodies in Detroit, and noise complaints are a byproduct of gentrification in urban areas. While death in this chapter is largely metaphorical, the uneven enforcement of noise ordinances on Black sounds and Black business has been referred to as “noise killing” and even “cultural execution” by those

affected. This chapter joins a larger ongoing discourse around sonic racialization and policing that remains crucial for understanding and undoing white supremacy in the US.

Chapter Three, “I Should Be Dead,” is about Black death, and the narratives of death and dying in hip-hop. I introduce a theory of radical Black presence that emerges as Blackness becomes transcendental - between liveness and deadness, and not bound to either. Building upon Abdul JanMohamed’s notion of the “death-bound-subject” (2005: 2), I frustrate common notions of death and dying to argue that within hip-hop, and specifically Detroit hip-hop - which is coded as Black due to both Detroit and hip-hop’s associations with Blackness - *deadness* is the state from which music is created, and this deadness is the primary basis for identity formation. I further explore theories of deadness as a space for radical Black presence through the music of an artist known as ZelooperZ. Specifically focused on his track titled “ISBD,” an acronym for I Should Be Dead, I demonstrate that the assumption of Blackness as always already dead frees one up to create, resist, or just exist *outside* of typical understandings of identity and being. I measure this deadness against concepts of liveness and other scholarly invocations of deadness to question what it means to die, what it means to die while Black, and how Black identity can be formed through the deadness of Detroit hip-hop. These ruminations reveal a path that allows Black Detroiters to bolster their identities and claim space in a supposedly dead city.

My fourth chapter, “The Horror,” is focused on the politics and poetics of a rap subgenre known as horrorcore. The subgenre, which has Detroit roots and a large Detroit presence, makes use of extreme, shocking lyrical imagery, which is often immediately dismissed as revolting, juvenile, or evil. I argue that this imagery is invoked to conjure up the fantastic aspects of the racialized imaginary of Black urban violence as a means of subverting

and critiquing common narratives. Detroit horrorcore relies on inspiration from the dead, ruinous city to offer a critique of a perceived ongoing numbness or ambivalence towards the everyday horrors experienced in the city. Rather than arguing horrorcore is merely a reflection of Detroit as hellscape, I reveal that it is also a form of art that is appreciated by those who experience everyday horrors. I gesture towards the work of Julia Kristeva (1980) to theorize how feelings of abjection, the feeling of disgust that comes when the lines between self and Other are blurred or disintegrated, aid artists in their goal of being shocking in a city where shock and horror are so quotidian. I focus primarily on the music of an artist known as King Gordy, the self-proclaimed “King of Horrorcore,” to demonstrate how a politics and poetics of horrorcore takes shape through his music, and how he uses music to both critique and reimagine the city.

In my fifth chapter, “Ghosts,” I follow the project’s through line of death to its (il)logical, supernatural end: afterlife. These afterlives are realized through various hauntings in Detroit hip-hop, both sounded and embodied. To investigate these hauntings, I reflect upon my experiences - at clubs, in my own car listening to the radio, and listening repeatedly through headphones - hearing the prognosticating echoes in a track titled “Death On Me,” by the late rapper Dex Osama, a now deceased Detroit rapper who is memorialized in various ways when his music is played. Additionally, I reorient terms commonly used in Sound Studies toward Black bodily praxis, laying the groundwork for a more coherent field of Black Sound Studies that is not merely a Black version of Sound Studies. Focused primarily on sound, recording techniques, and techniques of listening throughout the chapter, I search for Dex’s ghost in the recording of his prescient song “Death On Me,” trace the various echoes it has left behind, and turn an ear towards the various means through which other

passed on Detroit hip-hop figures continue to haunt the city, and the world. I conclude my project with a projection into Detroit's future, the future of Detroit hip-hop, and questions about the possibilities of a Black Sound Studies.

At the heart of my work lies an assertion that is paradoxical in nature: that there exists Black identity that is informed by both liveness and deadness yet exists outside of either category. My arrival at this juncture has been a slow, painful journey, the result of my being metaphorically torn asunder by Afropessimist thought and struggling to arrive at a Blackness that is not ontologically bound to social death, able to completely unbind from being a death-bound-subject (or completely transcend the ontological formation of death-bound-subject). Yet white supremacy has shown us that there can be no recognition of Blackness as humanity in a system that is built on the denial of Blackness as being - Blackness is forever nonhuman through this system. This is where my understanding of Blackness as being formed through and existing in a space of deadness originated. At the same time, it is not enough to say "they say we're dead, and yet we live;" while our recognition of our own humanity is clearly important, it does nothing to alter dominant white supremacist ideologies. My invocation of a radical Black presence is my attempt at imagining a Blackness that somehow exists outside of the dialectic of trauma and that predates the hegemonic force of white supremacy. While I continue to work through these ideas, I believe that lessons learned through Detroit hip-hop can be key in understanding them. I do not find it coincidental that hip-hop in Detroit invokes, evokes, moves through, and orbits around death so frequently. The constant denials of Black humanity that have occurred in Detroit through practices including disinvestment, uneven policing of Black bodies, housing discrimination, and displacement have made the city increasingly inhospitable for and antagonistic towards Black life. But much of the data I

gathered during my fieldwork signaled a desire to traffic in death, to move deeper into deadness. While there are certainly people within the hip-hop scene making the assertion that they are, in fact, alive, there seem to be just as many, if not more, who seem indifferent to or comfortable with (or happy about) their death or deadness. While my writing deals with various types of death and deals with a wide variety of responses to it, in the pages that follow, I am seeking this *something*, which I have called radical Black presence, that permeates Detroit hip-hop as actors respond to, work with, and create from narratives of death and dying.

# 1. Resurrected

Museums are curious places. The very idea of a museum indicates some assumed truths: that there are objects worthy of display over others, that there are things which deserve our gaze, that there is a need to hold certain things in reverence over others. Museums are spaces of knowledge that are created via exhibition, spaces for learning that are completely overdetermined by a team of curators, archaeologists, anthropologists, etc. Benedict Anderson wrote of the census, map, and museum as powerful weapons of subjection wielded by the colonial state (1983 [2006]). The museum, Anderson contends, is an apparatus through which the state can attach itself to antiquity, legitimizing itself as both creator and holder of history (1983 [2006]: 253). In this way, a museum can purport to have the interest of a local region, people, and identity in mind while still advancing a colonial agenda. These institutions are problematic - much of what they display, historically, is acquired through unethical means, like pillaging, whether or not this pillaging was given another name. Museums then seek to display these pillaged objects in a way that pushes their chosen narrative forward. Some displays are glorified art galleries, display halls for the work of chosen artists; others attempt to present historical moments or entire cultures. A museum cannot show everything, but what they choose to display is influenced by a number of factors, including the opinions of their hired curators and the money in the pockets of donors. Sometimes museums just hold the personal collections of the extremely wealthy or act as a monument to wealth – or means of tax evasion (see Yates 2015) – disguised as a philanthropic gesture toward the community. In the United States, they are generally non-profit organizations, and admission is rarely free, as they rely on admission fees for

operational costs. Sometimes the admission price will rise, depending on the scarcity of a touring exhibit that has entered the space. If there is a particular status attached to an artist, for instance Picasso, then one may have to pay extra to view the exhibit containing his paintings - one pays money to be in the same space as an object that is considered art because of its place in a museum, creating a complex relationship between money, value, and culture.

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Apparently, it all began with a sketch on the back of a legal pad (Lewis 2015). In August 2013, U.S. District Chief Judge Gerald Rosen, the appointed federal mediator in Detroit's bankruptcy case, was on vacation in Florida. Though he intended to get out of town quickly to golf, he was spending a lot of his time racking his brain over the Motor City's financial crisis. Detroit faced around 18 billion dollars in liabilities (Davey 2013). The city was obligated to pay around 32,000 pensions (Ferretti 2015), despite only having about 9000 city employees at the time, due to the massive population loss occurring over decades which led to a complete erosion of the city's tax base. Thousands of these pensioners were facing massive cuts to their benefits that would cost them their livelihoods. At the forefront of Rosen's mind was the fate of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, or DIA; the world-renowned museum was severely in danger of losing numerous pieces from its collection in a fire sale to satisfy debts with various creditors. According to writers at the *Detroit Free Press*, Rosen "picked up his pen and doodled an idea on the cardboard back of a legal pad. He wrote 'art' and drew a box around it, representing protection for the city-owned museum and its masterpieces appraised at billions of dollars. He wrote 'state' and 'pensions' and drew arrows in a diagram. He wrote several phrases — 'how much?' 'timeline,' 'what about fed gov,' 'foundations,' 'private sources'" (Bomey, Gallagher and Stryker 2014). Rosen's sketch



became the framework for what is known as the Grand Bargain, an interconnected series of negotiations credited with rescuing the DIA, saving pensions, and kickstarting Detroit's resurrection. Since the success of the Grand Bargain, the city has experienced a surge in investment and reinvestment, particularly in the areas stretching from the museum and Wayne State University to downtown along Woodward Avenue and Cass Avenue, two of the city's main arteries. The DIA has flourished in the years following the Grand Bargain and has professed desires to be relevant to a diverse audience and to serve as "town square of [their] community" and a "gathering place for everybody" ([dia.org/about](http://dia.org/about)). During this span the museum has increasingly looked to entice visitors through the programming of hip-hop events and exhibits. As the demographics of the community around the DIA and the greater downtown area change drastically, the idea of serving as town square – or gathering place for everyone, reflective of its surrounding community – becomes increasingly complicated.

This chapter examines and critiques how the Detroit Institute of Arts claims a measured stake in the Detroit hip-hop scene and local (Black) community at large, and how members of Detroit's hip-hop scene in turn make various claims over the physical and sonic space of the DIA. The relationships between the DIA and the hip-hop scene - and larger Detroit Black arts scene - are complicated because of the tangled webs between the institute and the city, the legacy of Black exclusion from "high" cultural institutions unless under a white ethnological gaze, and the politics of representation – in this instance, a larger neoliberal project of expanding a customer base under the guises of inclusion and accessibility. While I draw from multiple fieldwork examples and archival findings, my chapter orbits around two case studies: related performances by Detroit emcee/poet Mic Write that took place in a reclaimed material sculpture park in 2016 and the DIA's Kresge

Court in February of 2017, and an exhibit called *D-Cyphered: Portraits by Jenny Risher* that, in the museum's words, aimed to "take viewers on a photographic timeline that makes up the story of the Detroit hip-hop scene" that was on display from August 2017 to February 2018.<sup>7</sup> As hip-hop is not traditionally included in fine arts spaces, these case studies offer insights into various tensions that can arise. Museums have long been considered - and critiqued for being - spaces of whiteness (English 2015; Venugopal 2015; Travis 2019), for multiple reasons including the subjects on which they focus, the artists they display, and the white audiences they cultivate and cater towards (Gordon 2015). This overwhelming whiteness contributes to what Elaine Heumann Gurian refers to as "threshold fear,"<sup>9</sup> perceived barriers of exclusivity caused by whiteness that deter nonwhite people from entering a space (Gurian 2005). My case studies demonstrate the friction of Black sonic and visual encroachments into the white space of the DIA through different means. While the DIA ostensibly controlled the narrative behind the D-Cyphered exhibit and presented a patron-friendly version of Detroit hip-hop, Mic Write's performance eschewed the museum's vision.

### **From Democracy's 'Arsenal' to Rust Belt**

Detroit, like other cities in America's Rust Belt, was once an industrial force to be reckoned with. Factories churned throughout the night with tens of thousands of workers coming and going. Though primarily known for producing automobiles, many other industries like steel, textiles, and iron also thrived in the Motor City. During the Second World War, Detroit was known as The Arsenal of Democracy, as the automobile companies quickly converted to making weapons and combat vehicles for the United States' war effort (Sugrue [1996] 2005).

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<sup>7</sup> The DIA webpage, which bears the same title as the exhibit (<https://www.dia.org/art/exhibitions/d-cyphered-portraits-jenny-risher>), also notes the importance of Detroit's underground hip-hop scene and the recognition brought to the city through Eminem and the late J Dilla.

<sup>9</sup> Gurian notes that this terminology is borrowed from psychology, and the term was not typically used in the humanities at the time of her writing.

The Ford plant at Willow Run, just outside of Detroit, cranked out an astounding one B-24 bomber plane per hour (Trainor 2019). But before this productive heyday began, thousands of Black people migrated largely from rural areas in the South to urban, industrial areas of the North, seeking work opportunities. Henry Ford famously promised workers – all workers – a wage of \$5 a day, a decision that made headlines across the country (The Henry Ford 2014). Unfortunately, many Black workers, immigrant workers, and women arrived ready to work and collect this wage, only to find that it was not quite as advertised – the five dollars a day was partially wages, partially bonuses that had to be earned by successful participation in a socialization program that had “character requirements” like the avoidance of alcohol, and evidence that they were doing things “the American way” (Worstall 2012). The massive influx of Black workers allowed the automobile industry to thrive. Despite their jobs, life in Detroit was not easy for Black Americans; they were subjected to racial discrimination in just about every aspect of their lives. There was rampant segregation and discrimination in Detroit's housing market. Black folks were often blocked from buying homes and found themselves renting in extremely overcrowded spaces – a home designed for a family of 5 may have as many as 25 people living in it, as landlords would hastily, often illegally, build false walls or cordon off living spaces to create an extra “room” (Sugrue [1996] 2005). Multiple families would share a single bathroom, and landlords would turn suspiciously absent when any home repairs were needed. These were some of the issues that contributed to what have come to be known as the Detroit Race Riots of 1943, which Thomas Sugrue, the Detroit Historical Society, and others have noted were acts of white mob violence in response to Black Detroiters using public spaces, and a response to the building of a housing project in Conant Gardens – at the time, a primarily white neighborhood. When Black people

finally achieved some upward mobility and began to own some homes and business concentrated in a neighborhood known as Black Bottom, the neighborhood was bulldozed in the 1950s in the name of slum clearance, to make way for a highway and to allow for “redevelopment” (ibid). Black people had to find new places to live, but there were still many places they were not welcome. Perhaps most unfriendly was the city of Dearborn, Detroit's largest and closest suburb. Dearborn had an openly segregationist mayor named Orville Hubbard from 1942 to 1978, whose motto “Keep Dearborn Clean” could essentially be translated as “Keep Dearborn White” (Lessenberry 2015). When he left office, the city of Dearborn had a population of 90,000, and fewer than 20 people out of this 90,000 were Black (Loewen 2007). Black people were generally confined to the city of Detroit. The decade from 1970 to 1980 saw a rapid rate of job loss, primarily due to the city’s major industries relocating. In the near wake of the 1967 rebellion, the phenomenon most commonly known as “white flight” also reached a fever pitch – while white migration was underway in the decade preceding the 1967 rebellion, this event accelerated the relocation, with white families leaving the city proper for the surrounding suburbs or leaving the state altogether.<sup>10</sup> These demographic shifts were due in large part to racist policies and created a city with an overwhelmingly racialized geography. George Lipsitz (2011) provides more clarity to understand these movements, noting that racism is enacted in physical places and spaces – in other words, racism *takes place*, in a figurative sense (racism requires conditions to occur in historical or temporal sense), and in a literal one (racism requires *place* to be enacted, thus shaping both space and place). These various discriminatory policies in housing, lending, education, etc. contribute to what Lipsitz calls the *white spatial imaginary*, a white

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<sup>10</sup> As Charles T. Clotfelter (1976) notes in “The Detroit Decision and ‘White Flight,’” white and middle-class anxieties around jobs, racial change in urban areas, and school desegregation were primary factors contributing to the relocation and suburbanization of white Detroiters.

supremacist notion of place, order, individualism, and hierarchy that criminalizes and demonizes people of color. This spatial imaginary is exemplified in the idea of the white, cisgendered, heterosexual suburban home as default, and as exemplary moral guide within the US (2011: 13). This white spatial imaginary does not require the physical presence of white people – the conditions of Detroit’s underfunded and undervalued majority Black neighborhoods are a direct result of the white spatial imaginary, and the city’s current period of reinvestment and revitalization can be seen as a further proliferation of it.

The combination of this white flight, the relocating of the auto industry, questionable or corrupt politics, and general job loss has led to the image of Detroit popular in contemporary discourses, one of death, decay, lawlessness, and abandonment: a “dead city.” In the midst of this Death, it seemed that the legacy of Detroit was destined to spread through articles bearing titles like “The death of a great American City”, “The Death and Decay of Detroit”, or “10 American Cities that are Dead Forever.” In the abstract to a 2013 article titled “Is Detroit Dead?” published in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Peter Eisinger states, “an effective way to understand the slow death of the city of Detroit is through the prism of the course of a terminal disease, tracing the stages of symptom assessment, diagnosis, and curative intervention” (2013: 1). Continuing his pathological discourse, throughout the article he explores his hypothesis by using recent literature on Detroit that uses the “language of urban morbidity and mortality to describe the city’s condition” (2013: 1). While I would not call the article humanistic, Eisinger does consider the presence of people in the greater downtown area, noting that Detroit’s “vital core” shows signs of life. However, he is not optimistic about things:

Does this evidence of urban life contradict the judgment that the city is dying?... But how in fact is this apparently vital

activity to be understood? One possibility is that against all odds the patient is actually beginning to recover. A more likely explanation is that even in dying patients there are some organs that remain vital, even suitable for harvesting. (2013: 7)

His ultimate claim, based on an evaluation of the swath of literature on Detroit's dying and what he considers crucial urban functions, is that the Motor City has died. In the wake of several bodily metaphors throughout the essay, Eisinger reaches the somewhat banal conclusion that urban death is not the same as bodily death, in that cities can theoretically be brought back to life while human bodies cannot. But I would argue against this claim that the city has died. For one, his claim and others like it rest heavily on the reductive, capitalist, Rust Beltian notion that cities only have value insofar as they are productive industrial centers. Beyond this, Eisinger's claims of fatality arise because of his position that the city has "few working vital functions" (2013: 2), which include self-governance,<sup>11</sup> serving the economic interests of its citizens, cultural production, and the preservation and management of urban space for public and private purposes. By this rubric, it would seem that Detroit was alive and well even before bankruptcy proceedings began – while the emergency manager could modify the budget, sell assets, etc. without consulting city officials, his decisions had little bearing on how citizens functioned in their day-to-day lives. I have asked every last one of my research consultants in Detroit how the bankruptcy affected their lives and the responses have unanimously been that it did not change a thing for them.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Detroit never stopped being a center of cultural production, and citizens constantly employed

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<sup>11</sup> He lists the appointment of Kevyn Orr as Detroit's emergency manager during the bankruptcy crisis as evidence that the city is not self-governing – Orr had control over the city's finances and only answered to the state governor.

<sup>12</sup> Given some of the large scale changes that occurred as a result of bankruptcy and restructuring, like the privatization of the water system that led to large-scale water shutoffs and increased the frequency of citywide "boil notices" (meaning that one has to boil the water before it is safe to drink or cook with), it is highly unlikely that my interlocutors were truly completely unaffected by the bankruptcy. It is worth noting, however, that they responded as they did, which points to larger ongoing issues of systemic inequities and inequalities that have been pervasive in contemporary Detroit.

(and continue to employ) urban space for public and private purposes, whether sanctioned by the city government or not. Yet Detroit is talked about in these morbid terms, as if it has perished and is unrecoverable – that is certainly the tenor also taken by several of the authors Eisinger references for his article. One of the authors, journalist Charlie LeDuff, writes about his hometown of Detroit in similar terms, as if it is already dead; he goes searching for the cause of death in his book *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013), claiming that the city is on “deathwatch (2013: 3),” and calls it “Candy Land from a reporter’s perspective,” noting the “decay. Mile after mile of rotten buildings, murder, leftover people” (2013: 19). LeDuff favors a sensationalist reading of the city’s demise and places the blame on government corruption and lawlessness rather than disinvestment, automation of former skilled labor jobs, segregation, or capital flight, overlooking the ways that Detroiters have successfully persisted, in spite of these tales of evil governance.

During the 1950 census, Detroit was the nation's 4<sup>th</sup> largest city, with a population near 2 million. In 2010, census data showed a population of 713,777, marking the city’s lowest population since the 1910 census, and making it the only US city that at one time had a population above one million residents to fall below the million mark.<sup>13</sup> The city has been presented as a modern Pompeii, leveled by catastrophe, its crumbling, graffiti-stained facades standing like cautionary tales to those who would pass through. These caustic stories of the past have contributed to the conventional story of urban place in contemporary Detroit: a barren wasteland that is now open for the taking, an untamed frontier waiting to be claimed by displaced artists and venture capitalists from Brooklyn, as so heavily discussed in pieces like the *New York Times* article “Last Stop on the L Train: Detroit” (Conlin 2015).

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<sup>13</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye revealed this data in her March 22, 2011 *New York Times* article “Detroit Census Confirms a Desertion Like No Other.”

Beyond the disaster narratives, this story of contemporary Detroit is an ongoing tale of white middle- and upper-class evacuation, the city's failure to provide sufficient civic services for residents leading them to seek alternatives, and corporate divestment. Decades of this trend placed Detroit in a massive financial hole, owing an estimated 18 billion to creditors and insurers (Davey and Walsh 2013). Looking to mitigate further losses and sensing disaster on the horizon, Detroit mayor Dave Bing and the City Council forged an agreement with Michigan Governor Rick Snyder in the Spring of 2012 that allowed for wide-reaching oversight by the state, with the understanding that the state would help the city with its finances.<sup>14</sup> By the end of that year, a financial review committee was formed and spent the next two months collecting data. In February 2013, Governor Snyder announced that the state was taking control of Detroit's finances, and the following month a state of financial emergency was declared. Following the enactment of a contentious emergency manager law in March of 2013, Snyder appointed Jones Day partner and former Department of Justice United States Trustee Program director Kevyn Orr as the city's Emergency Manager. Tasked with completely overseeing all of Detroit's financial operations, Orr had the power to negotiate and rewrite the city's contracts as well as the extraordinary power to liquidate city assets to settle debt. In May of 2013, Orr released a report on the city's financial state, showing that Detroit was cash flow insolvent and spending a third of its budget on retiree benefits and pension payments. He attempted to get creditors to settle for 10% of what was owed to avoid bankruptcy but was ultimately unsuccessful. On Orr's recommendation and Governor Snyder's approval, Detroit filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection on July 18, 2013 - the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in US history. Once the city was deemed eligible, the task of determining what assets could be sold to satisfy creditors began. To the

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<sup>14</sup> As reported by the Associated Press and printed in numerous publications around the globe in 2013.



dismay of many, the art collection held at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) soon came into question (Caro 2013). As the DIA was city-owned, did that not mean that the collection could be considered assets of the city? In a series of negotiations, crafty maneuvers, and aggressive fundraising campaigns that have collectively been named “The Grand Bargain,” the DIA was able to protect itself from being sold for parts, put money into the city’s pension fund, and become an independent non-profit organization, safeguarded from similar situations that could arise in the future. But the story of the Grand Bargain reveals a tangled ongoing relationship between the DIA and city of Detroit that has produced several complicated outcomes for the museum, the surrounding community, and the hip-hop scene.

## **Priceless**

According to former DIA executive Annmarie Erickson and long-time Detroit arts journalist Mark Stryker, the general consensus among museum employees, trustees, and board members was that the museum got unwittingly dragged into the city’s bankruptcy talks, that the institution was being used as a pawn by the emergency city manager; but the DIA was only able to be dragged into the conversation because, at the time, it was owned by the city of Detroit (Wright 2015). The Detroit Institute of Arts was founded in 1885; like most other major public museums in the US, it was originally a private institution. Within a few decades of its founding, the museum found itself in major financial trouble and in danger of shutting down indefinitely. The museum’s trustees made an appeal to the city in the late 1910s, offering full ownership and custody of the collection and building to the city in exchange for municipal funding - a move Stryker refers to as a “Faustian Bargain” on the part of the DIA (“The Story Of The DIA: 128 Years Of Fortune And Crisis” 2013). In 1919, the deal was

solidified, and the DIA became city property. The institution was the only US museum of its size and notoriety that was completely publicly owned (ibid).

The museum's status as a municipal property did not do much to make it more accessible to the public, and the DIA managed to retain an air of exclusivity for most of its existence. Over its lifespan, the museum faced financial difficulties - it was forced to halt acquisitions in 1955 due to a lack of funding (Kennedy 2014) and was forced to temporarily close in 1975 for the same reason (Michigan Radio Newsroom 2014). In 2012, facing another financial crisis (this time, because of being tied to the city of Detroit, which was undergoing a decades-long financial crisis), the city proposed a 0.2 millage, or property tax, to the tri-county area to secure funding for the museum. In August of 2012, despite facing looming municipal bankruptcy, citizens of Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland counties voted in favor of the millage, due in part to the value they saw in the DIA and the service agreements proposed by the DIA in conjunction with the millage. According to the DIA's website (Millage Details 2012), the museum coordinated with each county's Art Authority to provide the following benefits to county residents:

- Free unlimited general museum admission
- Discounted special exhibition tickets
- Free school field trips with free bus transportation
- Free group visits for seniors on Thursdays, with exclusive programs, and free bus transportation
- Expanded teacher professional development programs
- Curriculum development with school systems
- Expanded community partnerships

The museum was now on the hook with voters to provide a litany of services and to no longer charge admission to residents of the tri-county area in exchange for funding. Perhaps it was this newly found focus on public accessibility that caused the staff, board, and

volunteers of the DIA to feel blindsided when informed that their collection might be up for sale. Soon, the questions were raised: what does the city own? What does the museum own?

The museum viewed itself as holding its collection “in trust” for the public, meaning that the museum took care of displaying the art, maintaining it, etc., but the collection belonged to the public, and the public was free to come in and see their collection whenever they wanted (Wright 2015). Their standing as a public trust, they believed, protected them from sale. Creditors, on the other hand, felt that since the city technically owned the building and everything in it - and because it was maintained with public funding - that everything in the museum was a fungible asset, able to be sold off for money to satisfy debts. Complicating the picture further, many of the works in the DIA’s collection are gifts that were given with very specific conditions that greatly prevented or prohibited their sale. If these caveats had been accepted, a ruling in favor of the creditors would have to be determined object by object because of these special conditions. As the auctioning of the collection was presented as a serious possibility, various auction houses and investment firms were brought in to appraise the worth of the “priceless” collection. The value of the collection was malleable, largely depending on who did the appraisal, the market at that time, and *what* was appraised. The world-famous Christie’s Auction House only evaluated the art purchased with city funds, which they valued between 850 million and 1.2 billion dollars. ArtVest Partners, an investment and advisory firm based in New York placed the total collection’s value between 4.6 and 8 billion dollars, but noted that because of the city’s desperate financial situation, they may be forced to auction pieces off in a “fire sale,” receiving far less than the pieces were worth - they estimated a total of 1 billion in this scenario. The creditors also paid for an appraisal from Victor Weiner Associates LLC, which valued the collection at 8 billion

dollars, enough to pay about half of the city's debts, and also proposed that the collection be used as collateral for a loan to the city. In the eyes of the staff and board of the DIA, there was no transparency in the bankruptcy process, and their fate was completely out of their hands. As noted by Maureen B. Collins, "the City faced the question of what mattered most – pensions or paintings?" (2016)

## **The Grand Bargain**

We have used the phrase, "The Grand Bargain," to describe the group of agreements that will fix the City's pension problem. That description is entirely fitting. In our nation, we join together in the promise and ideal of a much grander bargain...That grander bargain, enshrined in our constitution, is democracy. It is now time to restore democracy to the people of the City of Detroit. I urge you to participate in it. And I hope that you will soon realize its full potential.

*-Excerpt from Judge Steven Rhodes' bankruptcy ruling*

The leap from Rosen's legal pad doodle to Judge Steven Rhodes' ruling in favor of implementing the Grand Bargain took a massive amount of work. Rhodes claims in this ruling that the Grand Bargain would "restore democracy" to Detroiters; this opinion places a lot of weight on the role of corporations and charitable giving in the livelihood of the city and its residents. Maureen B. Collins writes:

In November 2013, leaders from some of the largest philanthropic organizations gathered at the behest of Judge Gerald Rosen, the appointed mediator in the bankruptcy case. Rosen asked these groups to donate hundreds of millions of dollars to alleviate the municipal deficit faced by the City's pension funds. The donations would be made not to the pension funds directly, but to the DIA. The DIA would then in turn contribute directly to the pension funds. By addressing the needs of the pension funds, the donations would effectively protect the DIA collection from deaccession. The proposal was a bold one, virtually unheard of as a solution to a municipal bankruptcy. (2016)

The organizations included the Ford Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, who donated 125 million and 100 million dollars respectively (Davey 2014). Ten other foundations pledged sums around 30 million dollars, all to be paid out over the course of twenty years. These large philanthropic gifts were still not enough to satisfy the terms of bankruptcy court. Rosen approached the State of Michigan to ask for a contribution, but the state was reluctant to contribute unless the DIA itself made a sizeable contribution. Essentially, the fate of the pensioners and the fate of the DIA were tied together - if enough funds weren't raised, the city would be forced to sell off the collection to satisfy its debts and to pay pensioners, who would be taking a drastic cut to their benefits. The museum was tasked with coming up with 100 million dollars of their own, after which the state would contribute almost 200 million (Felton 2014). Tapping into local foundations, individual donors, and the business community, the museum successfully raised the money and professed a newfound commitment to provide free or low-cost arts programs and programming for state residents - particularly those in the tri-county region. After the museum's vigorous fund-raising effort proved successful, the city's bankruptcy terms were accepted in court. Eventually landing on an arrangement that landed within the perception the museum board had of its institution as public trust, the City of Detroit then transferred all title and interest in the museum's collection to be held in a perpetual charitable trust - on behalf of the citizens of the City and State (Collins 2016). Because of the Grand Bargain, the museum's collection was safe, pensioner benefits were safe (and not as severely reduced as imagined), and the museum, now its own independent entity, was positioned to make a large impact on the community. Rosen's sketch now hangs in the offices of the DIA, and has been tongue-in-cheekily referred to as the museum's most valuable work of art. The Detroit Institute of Arts played a

big role in helping Detroit emerge quickly from bankruptcy. The city council, museum board, and investors saw it as very important to get the city out of arbitration quickly and not have the case tied up in courts for years - a long, drawn-out bankruptcy case was likely to scare off investors, lead to more tax base erosion, and cost an enormous amount in legal fees that would possibly place the city back into debt. The intense focus on the DIA and its collection during the bankruptcy process brought the museum's profile to the foreground in the story of Detroit's revitalization. As arts and culture are typically seen as drivers of urban redevelopment (Cole 1987; Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2014), the architects of the Grand Bargain sold investors on the idea that saving the DIA would essentially resuscitate the city of Detroit back to its former glory.

## **Mic Write**

On August 25, 2016, I put on my black snapback hat emblazoned with the words "Rap Fan" in bright white letters, walked out of my yet-to-be furnished third-floor apartment, down my building's noisy stairwell, and out into the pleasant air of a summer night in Detroit's New Center neighborhood. I had been in the city off and on with some frequency since the Spring of 2014 but had only just recently moved there. Fresh and at the beginning of my sustained dissertation fieldwork, I was going to hip-hop shows at clubs about five nights a week. I knew that the show this night would be different; rather than the bar/club venues I'd been attending, this show was happening at a recycled material sculpture park about a 90-second stroll from my apartment. Having driven past the odd little park numerous times on my way home, my curiosity finally got the best of me, so I decided to investigate the story of the park. After a laughably crude internet search – "recycled material sculptures graffiti New Center Lincoln" – I arrived at the Facebook page for Lincoln Street Art Park, where I

happened upon a serendipitous post: “Hip hop artist/poet Mic Write is filming his music video at the art park tonight. Come by at 10pm to be a part of the video.” I “loved” the post.

I arrived at the park around 9:55pm but was one of only a few people present at the park at 10. While waiting for the performer, and presumably, the rest of the crowd to arrive, I wandered around the park grounds to kill time. I slowly began noticing the number of things that seemed to be backwards, upside-down, or inverted. Everything seemed surreal, and sarcastically so. A wall covered in beautiful illuminated letters spelling out the word “DESTROY;” stones painted to look like cake; traffic cones used as beautiful entry ways, rather than to prohibit movement. The defiant act of assembling art out of discarded or found objects, à la Lonnie Holley,<sup>15</sup> defined this space. On the far side of the park sat a shipping container, painted mostly white with a rainbow streak and a mantra that popped up in many unsuspecting places around the park: “Share Your Candy.” I learned soon thereafter that the container serves as a learning center and workshop space for local artists and community members. Towering above the container stood the “Freak Beacon” – a massive, 75-foot, 9,000 lb. steel sculpture comprised of a geodesic orb pierced by a towering spire. By 10:20, a modest but lively crowd had amassed with high spirits and light beer in tow. An SUV pulled onto the grass in the park, facing the Freak Beacon. I tried to be inconspicuous and remain in the backdrop with my notepad but was quickly approached by a man in a black suit.

“Ay whatupdoe?” (A **customary Detroit greeting.**)

“Whatupdoe.”

“I’m Vince.”

“Alex. You’re making me feel really underdressed!”

“Ha! I had something before this, had to come out and support my boy.”

“Oh word, I don’t know him, I just know his music, and I saw this shoot was happening...”

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<sup>15</sup> Lonnie Holley, also known as “The Sand Man,” is an artist and musician known for his sandstone carvings and assemblages made from found or recycled objects. His work has been displayed at numerous venerable institutions like the Smithsonian and the American Folk Art Museum.

I looked up to notice a shadowy figure ascending the shipping container to hang a flag from the Freak Beacon. It was an American Flag, in black and white instead of red, white, and blue. The flag hung upside-down, which, according to United States Flag Code, should not be done, except “as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property” [ii]. Before my conversation could advance further, a voice from a megaphone rang out: “Ok folks, let's get started,” the director bellowed. The small crew set up quickly so that filming could commence. Mic Write had arrived on set, and the director encouraged him to ignore the “Please Do Not Climb” sign posted on the Freak Beacon to ascend to the top of the shipping container – it would be essential to have the flag in the background of some of the shots. I turned to Vince to ask, “What song is this video for?” “His new one, Pledge of Allegiance. I was learning it on the way down here.” I didn't know the song.

*“Is everyone ready?” the director asked. “Ok, start playback!”*

Music erupted out of the speakers of the SUV, which was performing the double duty of both playback device and set lighting rig. Write paced back and forth atop the shipping container, performing along to his track with larger-than-life energy. To the side of the container, a flamethrower let out multiple blasts – something the director thought would “look cool.” As the shoot progressed, we moved to various places within the art park, eventually landing opposite the shipping container. A bonfire had been built using recycled wood pallets, and the crowd was instructed to gather around it. Some attendees in the know performed a ritual of throwing things into the fire – pieces of paper, bits of cloth, all symbols of the things they wished to let go, the things they wished to bind them no longer. Over the course of the shoot, I was able to pick up bits and pieces of the lyrics to the chorus:

I pledge allegiance to myself; I pledge allegiance to my health.  
One nation under squad, indivisible. Underpaid, overworked and invisible.



I became the country I deserve, dap from my homies only flag that I serve.  
If it don't love you, don't serve. You become what you deserve.  
You're one nation all your own. Where there's love, there's always home.

These assertions and affirmations of nation building and possessing put forth by Mic Write are steps toward the creation of a Black spatial imaginary. Contrasting it with the *white spatial imaginary*, George Lipsitz marks the Black spatial imaginary as a democratic, community-building site of possibility that has emerged from movement and revolution.

Lipsitz writes:

African American battles for resources, rights, and recognition not only have “taken place,” but also have required blacks literally to “take places.” The famous battles of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement took place in stores, at lunch counters, on trains and buses, and in schools. These battles emerged from centuries of struggle over spaces, from fights to secure freedom of movement in public and to enter, inhabit, use, control, and own physical places. This long legacy helps account for the power of the Black spatial imaginary and its socially shared understanding of the importance of public space as well as its power to create new opportunities and life chances. (Lipsitz 2011: 52)

In “Pledge of Allegiance,” Mic Write conjures the Black spatial imaginary, using his lyrics to flip typical patriotic narratives of place, freedom, and duty into a call for new nation building, a space for Black visibility, legibility, audibility, and community. There are clear connections between Mic’s lyrics and the traditional US “Pledge of Allegiance” with which the song shares a name. Rather than pledging allegiance to a flag – and country – that has no allegiance to its Black citizens, Mic implores listeners to pledge allegiance to the things that he feels are needed for survival: self, health, love. To perform and film a video for this song in a space dedicated to inversion and reclamation only served to amplify its message. As Detroit continues to change so drastically and become more inhospitable to the BIPOC who

have called it home for decades, performances like these are important moments of cocreation, coalition building, and community maintenance.

## **Mic Write at the DIA**

Museums are often considered exclusionary spaces due to forced distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, admission fees, a focus on Eurocentric art forms, etc. Museums are overdetermined spaces obsessed with the act of display, carefully curated to present a chosen knowledge or narrative (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [1997] 2009). Museum curators and directors work together to present displays that they consider appealing to the museum attendee while still satisfying the demands of wealthy board members who have preferences they wish to see fulfilled. The museum’s program directors typically follow the same formula. When hip-hop makes it onto the program, it is as if it has been momentarily accepted as fine art, worthy of being in the museum for a limited time.

At the time of this writing, I have yet to see Mic Write perform in a “traditional” space for hip-hop - a club, a bar, a concert venue. A poet, emcee, and veteran of the Detroit hip-hop scene, he has certainly performed in these spaces; however, every time I had an opportunity to be in attendance, it was always in a space not typically considered a regular site of hip-hop performance: a weathered, old church turned recording studio/soundstage, an abandoned school, a recycled material sculpture park, a fine arts museum courtyard/atrium. When I brought this up in an interview, he chuckled in acknowledgment. “Huh. Yeah, I guess that's true.” In my repeated attendance at his shows and sustained interactions with him, it became abundantly clear that he is wholly aware of the spaces in which he performs, what they symbolize, and how performance and cocreation can flip these spaces.

On a Sunday in February of 2017, I arrived at Kresge Court, the intimate courtyard inside the world-renowned Detroit Institute of Arts. On a winter day with surprisingly mild weather, there were a lot of people out and about and the courtyard was fairly full; the space was illuminated by a blend of light fixtures and sunlight seeping in from the courtyard's all-glass roof, peeking through windows, casting long shadows across the space. Sculptures adorned the brick perimeter, and a free-standing portico graced by a rug, couches, and chairs gave the appearance of a lounge within the lounge. Patrick Thompson, the owner of the design firm contracted to redesign the space in 2013, stated that his goal was to make the space "the grandest living room in town" (Block 2013). A favorite space among students at Wayne State University and Detroit's College for Creative Studies, there were several people with headphones on/in, studying or working on group projects along the tables in the back. At center tables, people socialized, ate, and drank wine, and there were a few families eating at the tables along the wall directly across from where I sat. Of course, this was not the first time I was to see Mic perform among sculptures. But there were noticeable differences. The spaces seemed diametrically opposed. Lincoln Street Art Park was populated with sculptures made of found objects, refuse, recycled material. Recycling already carries connotations of ecoconsciousness, a desire to save the Earth and the beings that occupy it, and the finding of value in undervalued things – seeing the positive alternative possibilities inside of a discarded, overdetermined thing.<sup>16</sup> Reclamation is a powerful narrative that coordinates both with the space of the art park and with Mic's narratives of Black community-making in spaces of gentrification. The art park is outdoor, completely open to the public, and serves as the backdrop for everything from raves to community workshops. Kresge Court, on the other hand, is designed to reflect European architectural styles and give a nod to royal traditions.

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<sup>16</sup> Observation from George Lipsitz.

Though it is intended as a relaxing meeting place in the museum, it is lined with reminders of refinement and class. The “grandest living room” is a strange, homey testament to opulence performed in a way that only a museum could express.

After a museum event staff member made brief introductions over a small PA system, Mic Write took to the stage - a stool situated near the entrance/exit to the courtyard where he sat in front of a microphone. He proceeded to perform an unapologetic catalog of songs and poems covering topics from police brutality to white supremacy, to gentrification and the spatial dispossession that comes along with it. Performing a rhetorical move similar to that of numerous journalists and scholars, Mic Write draws associations between Detroit, death, the body, and morbidity in a song titled “Celibate.” Likening the city to a body, Mic uses anatomical references to speak of the perseverance of Detroit and his identity as a Black Detroiter pushing back against erasure.

Break it down like this  
If the city was a body,  
If the city was a body, I was born in the liver /  
I was brought up in the smoke,  
I was brought up in the liquor /  
They expected me to fail, they expected me to fold,  
but I stood up and delivered /  
gotta riot in my soul, cuz my heart is like a shotgun,  
and my blood is like a river

I closed my eyes, reclined, and let the echo of his amplified acapella cascade off walls of never-ending brick and wash over me. For a moment, I forgot where I was. It wasn't until a family made a commotion as they exited the space that I noticed the very high contrast between Black sound and white space. While the crowd was racially mixed, the space they occupied, and the entire space of the museum, was markedly white and Eurocentric, consistently reifying the viewpoint that high culture and fine art are synonymous with

whiteness. I looked around the room and noticed facial expressions in stark difference to how I felt about the performance; some people looked annoyed, others disturbed, some indignant. More got up and left. Following the performance, I approached Mic to congratulate him on the performance, waiting in line behind an older white couple who had survived the apparent onslaught of the performance. When I got the chance to speak with Mic, I asked if he'd felt strange performing such aggressive material in the hallowed space of the museum. He replied that he had only remotely *considered* holding back a little because there were some children in the front row. When I interviewed Mic Write and asked him to discuss this performance, he recalled the post-show interaction with the white couple. The woman had offered plaudits, calling the performance "powerful" and "moving." The man offered similar praise, but also noted that the "words were too fast" for him to understand. He asked Mic Write for a libretto and handed him a card unsolicited, so that he could "engage more."

In its prominent position in the comeback story of Detroit, the Detroit Institute of Arts has attempted to position itself as a central meeting place that is relevant to the diverse community that surrounds it. This has included programming acts and exhibits that have a large draw, which has meant an occasional dip of the toe into the water of hip-hop. The DIA has been under the leadership of Director, President, and CEO Salvador Salort-Pons since 2015. He was central in the creation of the museum's new mission and vision statements, which, according to the museum's website, imagine the DIA as "the town square of [their] community, a gathering place for everybody."<sup>17</sup> This has been achieved at low to moderate levels of success, in the eyes of many Black community members. In the eyes of some DIA employees, this proposed mission of diversity has been a failure. They claim that Salort-Pons does not possess sufficient knowledge on issues of race and diversity. Since Salort-Pons has

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dia.org/about>

been at the helm, 62 of the DIA's 371 employees have left, canaries in the coal mine signaling internal dissatisfaction. Rachel Corbett's July 2020 article in *ArtNet* uses stories and data gathered from six DIA employees (who spoke under the condition of anonymity) to point to the internal politics of the institution and the shortcomings of the museum's community programming. Corbett writes:

The Detroit Institute of Arts has a unique relationship to its community. In 2012, voters in three surrounding counties took the unusual step of approving a dedicated property tax to help shore up the museum's finances. In March, voters agreed to renew the program, which Salort-Pons has cited as a strong sign of public support for the institution. But many sources who spoke to ArtNet News said that the museum's community outreach is also affected by the fact that Salort-Pons, who is originally from Spain, is "naive" about the complexity of issues surrounding race, inclusivity, and representation in the US. (Detroit has the largest Black population of any city in the country, at 82.7 percent, although the surrounding counties behind the millage are predominantly white. A high proportion of the DIA's visitors—77 percent—come from the Detroit tri-county area, rather than as tourists). Staff say Salort-Pons's approach has caused diminished confidence in his leadership, particularly among non-white employees. The *Times* reported that Salort-Pons "conceded that his European background meant that initially he had had a limited understanding of the Black struggle in America but was taking steps to improve diversity." (2020)

The Detroit Institute of Arts has been under scrutiny for its racial practices for the past several years. Many employees and former employees, including one who penned an open letter of resignation in the Summer of 2020 (Montiel de Shuman 2020), do not believe the director is taking steps to improve diversity at all. As the people in executive positions continued to drag their feet on matters related to diversity and inclusion, sympathetic staff members did what they could to work towards "decolonizing" the DIA. According to Mic, in

2017, a group of Detroit artists were asked to be on an advisory panel addressing diversity and inclusion for the museum.<sup>18</sup> Artists asked the DIA why there was a show about the ‘67 Rebellion that featured no Detroit artists and were met with excuses that did not resolve the issue being raised. To date, there has been no show entirely dedicated to Detroit artists at the DIA. From November 12, 2019 to March 15, 2020, the museum ran an exhibition called “Detroit Collects,” which sought to explore “the rich history of collecting of African American Art in the Detroit region by private collectors,” and showed “local collectors’ interest in the diverse media, styles, genres, influences and subject matter that inspired them to collect art created by African Americans.” Though the museum attempted to operate at the intersection of Black Detroit collectors and Black artists, they did not allow the show to be populated solely by the community they profess to serve. The show was a celebration of private collector wealth. The DIA worked hard in the Grand Bargain to essentially say “we’re not a commodity, these pieces aren’t for sale,” all the while charging admission to view their collection, just making it for sale in a different way. After the tri county millage was passed and admission became free for residents of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties, the illusion of “free” was created. Residents still pay, but they do so with property taxes. Special events at the museum still often cost money, and there is still an admission charge for anyone who does not have an address in the three counties. Additionally, the museum board is obsessed with visitor count, and chooses to program things that will have a “big draw,” partially because they are trying to drive the sale of memberships, recruit new donors, and attract people from outside of the tri county area.

I talked to Mic Write about his performances at the museum and their attempts at involving hip-hop in exhibits. He responded, “DIA is weird, cuz I think *they* think it’s kinda

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<sup>18</sup> According to Mic Write, in an interview I conducted July 4, 2020.

sexy when someone comes in there and turns the table up...but not too much. Like ‘oh, we’re edgy.’” He addressed the underwhelming and ineffective attempts at diversity and inclusion lobbed by the institution, saying that the DIA “started getting smarter...if we just occasionally do a poetry thing here. If we do a hip-hop photo exhibit here, we’re different, we’re edgy, we’re doing it.” According to Mic, the board is typically somewhere in between wanting family-friendly performers who reflect their personal tastes and not necessarily caring *who* is brought in to perform as much as they care about the events being well-attended. When I spoke to Mic about his performance (and subsequent performances at the DIA), he noted that it took somewhat of a “perfect storm” to pull it off. He was contacted by Michael Hill, the DIA’s Community Partnership Program Coordinator, who was a fan of his work. Hill told him to do whatever he wanted, to “come in and just do [his] thing.” Given the courtyard’s usual rotation of cellists, flautists, and other performers generally associated with the Western classical art music tradition, the booking of an emcee was against the grain. Even when poets are booked to perform, they typically fit within similar polite aesthetics. Mic writes notes that generally, performers are asked not to disparage the DIA, but that warning was not given. He also had the advantage of performing a timed event, rather than being an exhibition, meaning the performance only happened one time - he couldn’t be asked to alter the next performance of a show that would not happen a second time. Additionally, it was known that no antagonistic board members would be in attendance to raise complaints or attempt to shut it down. Despite all this knowledge, Mic recalls being nervous at first, but says that he made sure to construct a set list to “say what [he] felt like needed to be said in gentrified areas of Detroit.”



In his 1982 monograph *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker considers the political economy of art, discussing the complex networks of artists, consumers, critics, and more, arguing that the negotiations between all of these parties is what produces a work of art; all art within art worlds is a collective social product. He discusses performing artists selling not their live performance itself, but the right to be present at their performance. This is not unlike museums selling the right to view art that they own, after purchasing (or being gifted) the right to display it. Booking a performer for the museum places the performer within the category of art that the museum is graciously displaying and selling one the right to observe. The state, and the institution itself, have a stake in what is displayed. As Becker notes “the state always has an interest in the propensity of its citizens to mobilize or be mobilized for collective action” (1982: 166). The museum executives are motivated by their own aesthetic beliefs, and the “merging of politics and aesthetics thus affects what can be counted as art at all, the reputations of whole genres and media as well as those of individual artists” (ibid). But when the art that you display is living, and literally speaks for itself, there is even less institutional control over how it will be interpreted - particularly if the artist is vehemently anti-gentrification and offering heavy, albeit implicit, critiques of the DIA.

An example of the tension created by this ambiguity was perfectly encapsulated in the interaction between Mic Write and the older white man who asked him for a libretto after the performance. The term libretto makes an obvious reference to the Western classical art music` tradition, sometimes existing as screen-projected accoutrement for attendees at the opera, theater, or other musical events where the donning of formal wear has become an unofficial rule over the past two centuries. The patron was performing the double move of reassuring Mic Write that his performance was indeed high art and worthy of existing in the

museum (as evinced by his use of the setting-appropriate word “libretto” instead of “lyrics”), and telling him that he couldn’t understand the words, as if they were in an indiscernible language; he deployed his museum patronage in a patronizing manner. Additionally, he implored Mic to perform the extra labor of sending said libretto to him directly via his email address, which was on a piece of paper that he offered unsolicited. And additionally still, rather than asking where the music could be purchased, or when the next performance might occur, he assumed the right to possess and view Mic Write’s lyrics at his leisure, for free. This interaction represents the way the museum views and uses hip-hop, as an artistic form once inside the walls of the museum, but only if presented in a way befitting the space, or easily interpreted via their preferred medium. Unlike pieces of its collection, the museum does not attempt to historicize or continually display hip-hop. It is ethereally, momentarily viewed as art until the performance ends and leaves the museum once again.

What makes a performance property, and is it the property of the museum once passing through the doors of the institution? As we live in the wake of chattel slavery, living what Christina Sharpe refers to as the “afterlife of property” (2016: 15), the museum exhibits a sleight of hand in the booking of performances from Black community members.

According to museum staff members, the institution professes to have a mission of diversity, inclusion, and community engagement, but their interest in inclusion is inextricably linked to their desire to sell tickets; thus, the performances they schedule are objects of display around which the museum seeks to profit. Museums are principally concerned with the act of showing, with display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [1997] 2009), thereby making everything they present an object in danger of exploitation. But as Fred Moten posits in the first line of his monograph *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), “the history

of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (2003: 1). Moten is referring to the liminal state in which Black people were forced to exist during the period of chattel slavery – that of both conscious subject and literal purchasable object. When objects can and do choose to assert their subjecthood and personhood, it proves more difficult to display them in a manner that fits the aesthetic and narrative vision of the institution.

Mic Write’s performance broke the mold, offering a louder, uncensored display of Blackness atypical of the courtyard’s usual rotation of dreamy poets and solo instrumentalists. Although the space of the museum and its courtyard were not inhabited only by white people, these are undoubtedly white spaces. As activist/filmmaker Dream Hampton notes in a 2015 *New York Times* article focused on hipster migration from Brooklyn to Detroit, “If you look around and find yourself in an all-white space, you should know you are having a racially curated experience, like a Kenyan safari...” (Conlin 2015). Her sentiment is echoed by Mic Write, who reminded me in one of our first interactions that in Detroit, “you’re only ever a block from the ‘hood.” For Mic Write, this is not the threat it might be for others... for him, the ‘hood is a resonance, an undeniable energy found through cocreation within Black Detroit. As Murray Forman argues in *The ‘Hood Comes First* (2002), the ‘hood is a spatial, political, geocultural expression of locality that helps to mark collective identity, and it is frequently invoked through the use of hip-hop. These discourses of urban space and place are heavily racialized – the ‘hood is Otherized by the presence of the DIA, which spatially and culturally reinscribes notions of Eurocentricity, class division, and whiteness through its art collection, and through the way it has influenced the transformation of its immediate surroundings. Employing Mic Write’s sentiments and those expressed by Forman

reveals that the ‘hood can be brought to these exclusionary and gentrified spaces – sonically, symbolically, and otherwise – via hip-hop creation and performance.

## **D-Cyphered**

For six months from August 2017 through February 2018, one could be transported to the world of Detroit hip-hop through an unlikely portal - a photo exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts titled “D-Cyphered.” Featuring portraits shot by Detroit College of Creative Studies graduate and seasoned advertisement and editorial photographer Jenny Risher, the exhibit was born out of a book Risher created bearing the same name. According to the ‘About’ section on Risher’s website, “Risher’s second book, **‘DCYPHERED’**, takes a look at Detroit’s undocumented Hip-Hop Community.” Yet the curated collection displayed a number of photographs of Detroit’s most celebrated hip-hop personalities - rappers, DJs, producers, and even a couple of mothers of late Detroit legends - some of them, like Eminem (photographed in black and white, prominently displaying two middle fingers for the camera), among the most documented musicians in the world.

The exhibit title has strong implications in the context of hip-hop. A cypher is the traditional name for a circular gathering of emcees or b-boys and b-girls<sup>19</sup> in which individual performers take turns showcasing their style and talent in a group performance setting; Imani Perry defines a “cypher” as “a conceptual space in which a heightened consciousness exists” (2004: 107). Taken this way, the exhibit could be thought of as a space in which observing the portraits was an act of performance and an act that could heighten one’s consciousness about hip-hop in general. Being in the museum bestowed the exhibit with an air of exclusivity. As noted by Elena Benthaus, “the form of the cypher organizes

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<sup>19</sup> B-boy and b-girl are slang terms for breakdancers.

interiority and exteriority...for spectators, who are not performing nor are intending to perform, there is always a certain inaccessibility to the experience” (2018: 36). Furthermore “Decipher” means to convert code into normal language, or to interpret something successfully. Hip-hop is a genre full of coded language and sounds, from the slang or vernacular used in lyrics, to the specific lyrical references identifiable to those in the “in group,” to sampled sounds acting as contemporary archive for past records. Listening to the music does not necessarily require deciphering, but the more intimate knowledge one has, the more there is to decipher and appreciate. The DIA presented the exhibit as a way of deciphering the presumed exclusive world of Detroit hip-hop for its visitors, offering access to a distant culture right in its own backyard.

The displayed photographs were ethnographic objects, made so through the processes of detachment and recontextualization, gathered and used to explain and interpret hip-hop for the DIA community. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett speaks to how these processes occur:

Detachment is more than a necessary evil. Fragmentation is vital to the production of the museum both as a space of posited meaning and as a space of abstraction. Posited meaning derives not from the original context of the fragments but from their juxtaposition in a new context. As a space of abstraction exhibitions do for the life world what the life world cannot do for itself. They bring together specimens and artifacts never found in the same place at the same time and show relationships that cannot otherwise be seen...Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create. (1997: 3)

The disparate subjects of the exhibition were discursively unified and physically placed together to represent the knowledge world the museum wished to display for a community

that presumably would not have access to the hip-hop world. This gathering of the Other allows for centralization of the unmarked Self.<sup>20</sup>

The discursive theme of Detroit is a powerful organizing force and core reference in hip-hop, especially so in a music known for stressing regional identification. But this does not mean that the exhibit captured an existing “scene.” Many of the artists featured in the exhibit did not work together, for various reasons ranging from not ever meeting to genuinely disliking the other artist. Yet my fieldwork showed me that it is common for people to rally around artists in the city simply because they are from or of the city. At prior shows I attended DJed by Nick Speed, it was commonplace for him to play a wide variety of Detroit hip-hop styles, only bound by being from Detroit. He would say things like “All Detroit music!” or “Exclusive Detroit shit” over the microphone as he switched between songs. For another example, as we hung out in the park mingling during the music video shoot for Mic Write’s “Pledge of Allegiance,” someone was playing music from their phone over loudspeakers and on a few occasions when they walked over to skip a song they were not necessarily in the mood to hear, they were halted by other attendees and told “you can’t skip that, that’s a Detroit artist.”

*D-Cyphered* was the museum’s first-ever exhibit focused solely on Detroit music - a remarkable fact, considering the reverence placed upon the city’s most well-known cultural export, Motown Records. The general press around the launch of the exhibit treated it like something between a love letter to Detroit and a repatriation project, a gift from Risher and the museum to the city. They spoke of documenting the music, representing an oft-overlooked scene in national discourse. As James Clifford notes about his visits to indigenous art museums and cultural centers in the Northwest, through a repatriation project,

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<sup>20</sup> An important distinction pointed out to me by Dave Novak.

“master narratives of cultural disappearance and salvage could be replaced by stories of revival, remembrance, and struggle” (1988: 109). This presentation of the exhibit fit perfectly into the DIA’s narrative of community outreach *and* the greater downtown narrative of resurrection and renaissance. The photographs, staged according to the wishes of Risher and exhibit curator Nancy Barr, were accompanied by information placards containing the site location for the photograph and various kinds of background information about the artists, generally with a quote from the artist included. And yet the artists were consistently displaced and sidelined by the central role of the museum itself.

One press run/marketing strategy starred Detroit battle rappers Marvwon and Quest MCODY in a video advertisement for the DIA and the D-Cyphered exhibit. In a parody of *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), Marv and Quest experience the DIA with the same childlike wonderment exhibited by Ferris and Cameron in John Hughes’ classic film. Their day at the DIA begins with a frustrated Quest waiting for a tardy Marvwon to arrive. Upon Marv’s inquiry as to why Quest wanted to meet at that particular place, Quest replies “you’ll see. Come on.” An important exchange follows:

Marv: Ooooh...

Quest: What now?

Marv: I didn’t bring any cash.

Quest: It’s free.

Marv: Free? Or is it *free* free?

Quest: It’s *free* free.

Marv: Oh, so it’s free.

Quest: ....yes.

Marv: ...that’s pretty cool. That’s nice of them.

The references to the Hughes Film can be seen throughout the promo, including breakings of the fourth wall, Marv and Quest walking in a hand-holding train with small children, and Marv getting lost staring at a Van Gogh painting - in *Ferris Bueller*, Cameron (Alan Ruck)

experiences a small existential crisis staring into Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grand Jatte* (1886) at the Art Institute of Chicago. The rappers spend time reflecting on arguably the most famous piece of art by a Black artist in the museum, Kehinde Wiley's *Officer of the Hussars*, before eventually landing on what they consider "the best piece of art in this place," the photograph in which they both appear in the museum's D-Cyphered exhibit. The video, posted to YouTube and to the DIA's Instagram account on January 31, 2018, ends with the emcees inviting viewers to come see the exhibit, which would be up for another month. The ad is a clear attempt to authenticate the realness of the hip-hop exhibit, a strategy to appeal to "urban youth" and a more diverse clientele (see: Black people). The dialogue, likely a mixture of scripted lines and improvisation, is filled with slang and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), typical of the conversation between two Black Detroiters. The strategic juxtaposition of this type of speech against the setting of the DIA might have intended to send the message that even though DIA is a fine arts museum, it is aspiring to be a community space, one where you are free to come as you are, one where all are welcome, free to interpret art in the vernacular that they choose. But public reception of the video presented a less welcoming response. After the museum posted this advertisement on Instagram, one user named weare1tv commented "Don't forget security watches you if you look like the above gentlemen in the video..." This comment led to an exchange between the commenter and Marvwon – one of the stars of the advertisement – who claimed he'd "never had an issue with security" (diadetroit Instagram post 1/31/2018).

The photographs in D-Cyphered were hung in a large room with a few small, cushioned benches, and plenty of space to stand back and observe their beauty or pontificate to the people around you. In case the visual representation was insufficient, the exhibition



also had small speakers hanging overhead, continuously playing a Detroit hip-hop mix produced and curated by Nick Speed, one of the city's most well-known and respected producer/DJs. Speed was also featured in one of the photographs with his frequent collaborator, an emcee known as Seven the General. Slightly off-center in the room sat a table with cards, pencils, and a large binder -- a guestbook of sorts. A prompt on the table read:

**“When people think of Hip-Hop, they might associate the music with East Coast and West Coast cities, such as Compton, California, or New York City. But the influence of Detroit Hip-Hop has certainly gone beyond the local. *Share how Detroit Hip-Hop has affected you, this city, or the world. Put your response in the album.*”**

The individual cards were printed with the three parts of the aforementioned question, and spaces for guests to respond:

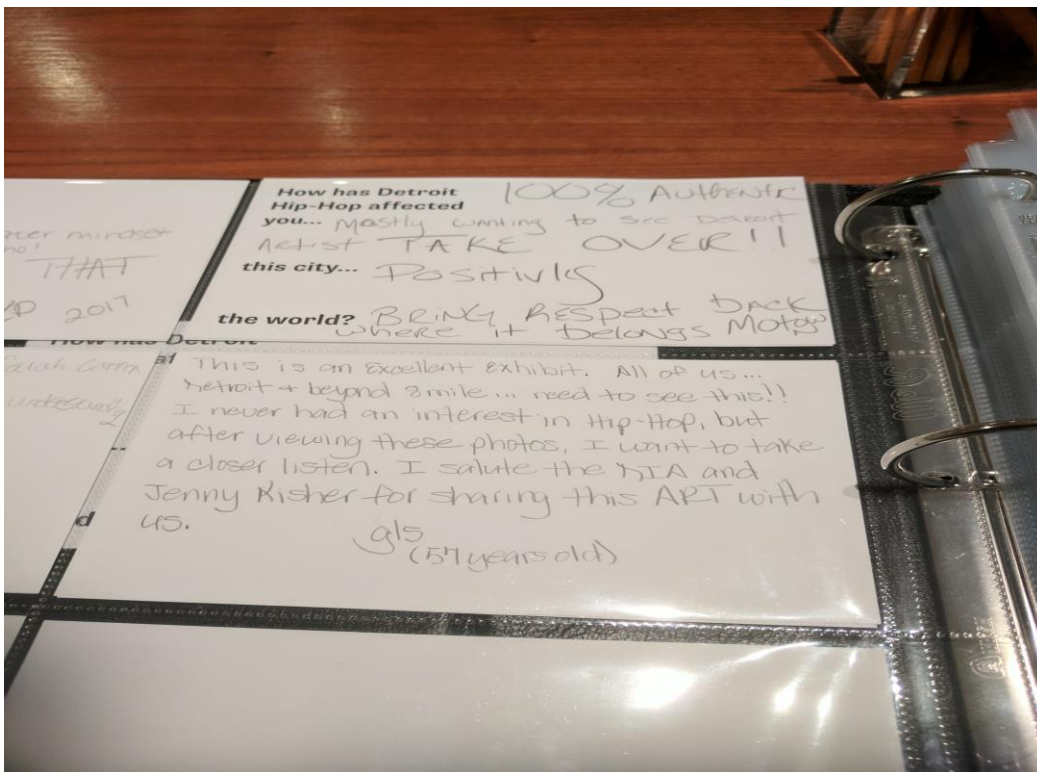
**How has Detroit Hip-Hop affected you....**

**this city...**

**the world?**

Though some of the pages were filled with signatures and Soundcloud links - essentially, lesser-known artists taking the opportunity to promote their own music in a sympathetic space - the album served as a mostly-anonymous guest book for those who attended the exhibit. Many responses described the impact of seeing so many images of Detroit hip-hop artists in one place. Nick Speed's parents each wrote a response, sharing their pride in their son's accomplishments and their love of the hip-hop scene. In my multiple visits to the exhibit, I noticed trends among the responses. Many were about self-affirmation and realization, with notes like “[How has Detroit Hip-Hop affected you...] IT MAKES ME FEEL UNAPOLOGETICALLY BLACK!”, or “[How has Detroit Hip-Hop affected you...] Keeps a 70 yr. old white woman dancing!” Others wrote about recasting Detroit in a new

light: “It reminds me that Detroit has more to offer and isn’t just a city of violence.” The sentiment seems innocuous enough, though it is peculiar that it would take looking at still photographs of rappers hanging in an art gallery to remind one that there are things in the city besides violence. Ironically, too, many of the artists featured on the walls (i.e., Insane Clown Posse, Esham, King Gordy, and Bizarre) are known for their hyperviolent lyrics, characteristic of a hip-hop subgenre known as Horrorcore that has strong roots in Detroit (see Chapter Four).

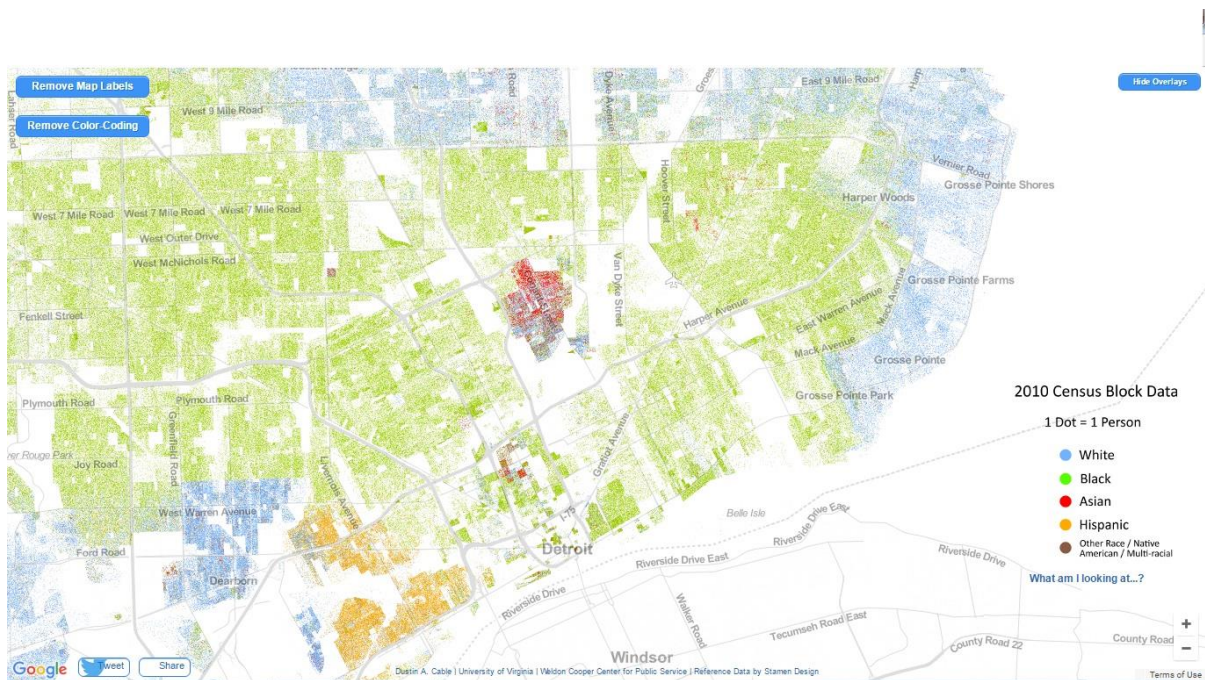


One note was written on the back of card, so that the writer could express all their thoughts without the prompts in the way. The writer included their initial, and age in the signature:

**This is an excellent exhibit. All of us...Detroit + beyond 8 mile...Need to see this!! I never had an interest in Hip-Hop, but after viewing these photos, I want to take a closer listen. I salute the DIA and Jenny Risher for sharing this ART with us.**

**- gls (57 years old)**

The sentiment seems sincere enough: they were moved by the exhibit and want others to be moved. But although the race of the author is unknown, the “all of us” referred to in the statement has strong racial implications when coupled with the idea of “Detroit + beyond 8 mile.” 8 Mile Road serves as the border between Detroit (Wayne County) and Ferndale (Oakland County). There is a stark difference in the counties, and cities, along racial lines. In this statement, one can take Detroit as shorthand for Black, and “beyond 8 mile” as shorthand for white (and upper class, given the stark income difference between the cities on either side of the road). GLS’s comment demonstrates a refusal to take Black art forms seriously, unless transmogrified by the space of the art museum – one of my primary sources of trepidation about the exhibit. To have a sudden interest in listening to hip-hop after 57 years of no interest because one viewed photographs of rappers in an exhibit is a double-edged sword. On one side, it is remarkable that this person possessed the openness to try something new and consider the music as having value; on the other, it is evidence of deeply flawed and systemically racist and classist thinking that demands all things pass through a filter of whiteness to be deemed palatable and considered valuable. This is echoed in their closing salutation, thanking Jenny and the DIA for sharing “ART,” in all caps. Hip-hop’s inclusion in the Detroit Institute of Arts made it suddenly worth listening to.



**Dustin Cable’s “Racial Dot Map” from 2013. Each dot represents a single person, with green dots representing Black people and blue dots representing white people. The stark shift near the top of the map occurs at 8 Mile Road.**

Beyond matters of taste and convention, the separation between high culture and mass/pop culture is reinforced across Europe and the US through state subsidies and capital investments to Western art culture.<sup>21</sup> Museums participate in the reinforcement of this in a number of ways. Scholar and visual artist Melissa Huang (2014) writes:

Art museums have positioned themselves as the keepers of artistic culture, and are generally thought to reflect the history and values of the people they represent. Unfortunately, because American museums exist in a kyriarchal society they are often governed by kyriarchal values. Societal prejudices imbue the museums with the power to determine “good” or “bad” artwork

<sup>21</sup> For instance, self-employed individuals with art school degrees in Germany are entitled to a fifty percent reduction in insurance costs, US symphony orchestras are sponsored and underwritten by banks and other large corporations, etc. Conversely, when artists from outside of this typical framework cross into the spaces of Western art culture, i.e. Kendrick Lamar’s unconventional 2018 Pulitzer Prize Award for his album *DAMN*. (the only time the award has gone to someone who is not a Western art music composer), there is controversy.

in line with the goals of the privileged. While the process of selecting artists for museum exhibition may seem impartial, it is as flawed as the society the museum represents. For artists who do not identify as cisgender, straight, white men, discrimination hinders career advancement and contributes to their exclusion from the canon. Ultimately, museums are influenced and reinforced by kyriarchal standards in a way that negatively affects the careers of artists outside of the mainstream.

Using the feminist studies framework of kyriarchy - intersectional systems built on domination and oppression - Huang demonstrates the way that patriarchy influences the way museums draw distinctions between “good or bad” artwork, in essence high and mass culture, in a way that benefits and reinforces their status and power.

Some well-respected artists deliberately sought to blur the lines between high and mass: Andy Warhol famously painted pictures of mass produced objects like Campbell Soup cans; Roy Lichtenstein painted “pop art” that was meant to parody the very idea of pop art. Musician Frank Zappa poked fun at the strangeness of the distinction, and really the idea of art itself, stating, “The most important thing in art is the frame. For painting: literally; for other arts: figuratively-- because, without this humble appliance, you can't know where The Art stops and The Real World begins. You have to put a 'box' around it because otherwise, what is that shit on the wall?” (Zappa and Occhiogrosso [1989] 1999). Of course, Zappa was correct: in the case of D-Cyphered, or Mic Write’s Kresge Court performance, it seemed to be the frame of existing in the Detroit Institute of Arts that pushed nonbelievers into considering hip-hop might be art in the first place. Therein lies one of the complications of the museum programming hip-hop. A program director must decide what slice of hip-hop is museum-worthy, what counts as “good artwork” that falls in line with the goals of the museum’s privileged board of trustees. As noted by DIA employees both current and former,

these decisions are often financially motivated, aimed at what will drive the most attendance while still falling within the museum's vision. D-Cyphered worked well for the museum because its subjects were photographed, and therefore silent (soundtrack notwithstanding). Mic Write's anti-white supremacy performance is an example of what can happen when the art speaks.

### **Missing Proof**

Returning to the comment cards, something very noticeable was the pattern of visitors commenting on both presences and absences of particular local musicians. Some addressed this by including their own info, like "Puma Boys Break Dancing Crew 1984 Detroit." One artist, @Mik3yMicrophone according to the signature, wrote out lyrics (presumably their own) on the comment card. There were incredulous remarks about various inclusions in the exhibit. One visitor wrote "Kid Rock? Delete LMAO y'all wild for that," echoing a fairly common sentiment in the city of Detroit and within the hip-hop scene that Kid Rock is not a true Detroiter (he's from a small town about an hour north) and does not make hip-hop. His hyperconservative, often racist political leanings also contribute to the scene's general disavowal of him and his music. Multiple visitors, perhaps part of the same group, commented on the absence of Grammy Award-winning hip-hop producer/drummer/songwriter Karriem Riggins. "Kariem (sic) Riggins!! is missing." "PS ADD KARRIEM RIGGINS!" Given his stature, it seems more likely that his omission was due to not being able to make contact with him, or a schedule conflict, than a deliberate, conscious omission. The specter of one such absence seemed to loom large in the album:

**"I see Blade and Dilla got a nice tribute! But it's missing PROOF!!"**

Blade Icewood, J Dilla, and Proof represent a triumvirate of the Detroit hip-hop scene, each of whom passed away in their prime. Blade Icewood was fatally shot in 2005, Dilla died in 2006 after succumbing to a rare blood disease known as TTP, and Proof was fatally shot in 2006. Since their deaths occurred a decade before Jenny Risher began her project, there was certainly no way to include portraits of them in her self-shot exhibit. However, Blade and Dilla were made present through photographs of their mothers. Each portrait features the respective mother interacting with pictures of her son. Blade's mother holds and gazes at her son's high school graduation photo, with her hand placed lovingly on her chest. On the other side of her sits a table, with a photo of her and her late son together, and an award that was presented to her son. With eyes closed and a big, closed-mouth grin, J Dilla's mother, lovingly known worldwide as "Ma Dukes," hugs a photo of a very young, smiling J Dilla. She is surrounded by paintings that have been created in tribute to her late son, one of the most revered hip-hop producers of all-time. There was no photograph of Proof's mother in the exhibit, likely because she passed on before Risher's project gained steam and she was able to be photographed. It seemed to that visitor that the memorialization taking place was incomplete or improper. Oddly enough, Proof was absolutely included in the exhibit. The portrait of Detroit's Supa Emcee was essentially a tribute to Proof: Supe wore a black t-shirt with the words "BIG PROOF FOREVER 1973-2006," while bearing his forearm tattoo dedicated to Proof, and standing in front of a mural featuring Proof's face. The perceived slight was enough to elicit an emphatic response from the visitor, which speaks not only to the respect the late emcee had in the community, but to people's need to grieve, and their desire to see their loved ones canonized, their presences kept from fading away.

In and outside of Detroit, Black mourning and funerary traditions differ from those not in the Black community. For instance, it is common for Black people to be honored with a “homegoing” rather than a typical funeral when they have passed on,<sup>22</sup> which usually includes an open casket that is heavily adorned with flowers and beautiful fabrics, a parade of fancy cars to transport the family of the deceased, and a general celebratory mood to send the deceased peacefully into the afterlife (Holloway 2002). Tiffany Stanley writes that “Homegoings can offer Black Americans the respect in death that they don’t always receive in life,” also noting that “Black funeral spaces also provide refuge for the living: A family in mourning can be comforted and understood within a community institution, away from an often-racist world” (Stanley 2016). Matt Sakakeeny writes of the distinctly Black New Orleanian tradition of “jazz funerals,” wherein mourners walk from the funeral service to the burial site to the beat of a brass band. Over the course of the march from one location to the next, the tenor of the music changes from mournful to joyful, and the procession transforms into a “moving block party,” with a celebratory mood deemed necessary for a proper memorial and a proper sending off of the deceased (Sakakeeny 2010). Participants are able to locate both sound and self in this very public display of mourning. Yet New Orleans may be exceptional in this regard, as not all mourning is allowed such space. Candi K. Cann discusses this in her 2014 monograph and argues that “all forms of alternative memorialization are emerging because of, and concurrent with, the disenfranchisement of mourning. Bereavement is no longer given public space in society or culture, which forces people to create and adopt alternative forms of mourning to help them navigate public space with their altered status as grieving individuals” (13). In the Black community in Detroit,

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<sup>22</sup> The phrase *passed on* is not used only by Black people, but it is worth noting that it is very widely used in the Black American lexicon – particularly among churchgoers.



markers of alternative memorialization and public bereavement are common, with memorials taking many forms including tattoos, t-shirts, murals, car window decals, and more. Using proxies to represent these important figures in Detroit hip-hop, The *D-Cyphered* exhibit itself served as an alternative space of memorialization through the inclusion of Dilla, Proof, and Blade Icewood. Visitors from within the Detroit hip-hop scene were able to continue grieving the losses of those artists who greatly impacted and continue to impact the scene.

### **Self-Reflection**

By many accounts, the artists in the exhibit were thrilled to be represented. On the surface, part of this can be assumed via their agreeing to be photographed for the exhibit in the first place. Yet this assumption may overlook many factors that led to the subjects' agreement to become part of the show. As Elizabeth Povinelli argues in *The Cunning of Recognition*, the condition of recognition is often such that subjects are called upon to reconcile the irreconcilable – for instance, personal moral obligations that contrast with or contradict civic or societal obligations (Povinelli 2002). Using case studies from her fieldwork with indigenous peoples in Australia, she evokes numerous enactments of this tension, showing that the recognition from the nation-state required a certain performed authenticity on the part of the indigenous, an imagined subject that people both wanted to be and also could not fulfill because they could not be themselves. Many of the artists included in *D-Cyphered* are on record expressing their joy at being represented. Artists attending the exhibit's opening night were dressed to the nines and took elated meta<sup>23</sup> photographs posed next to their own portraits, posting them on their social media accounts. Yet a tension similar to that noted by Povinelli may be found in *D-Cyphered*.

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<sup>23</sup> I use this to mean both 'zoomed out' and 'self-aware.' The artists recognized themselves in photographs and got a kick out of taking photographs with their own photographs.

On a micro level, appearing in the photographs required the subjects to be posed in various ways that juxtaposed Jenny Risher's artistic vision with the way the artists saw themselves or wanted to present themselves – visions that may not cohere without coercion. For instance, in an interview with *24/7 Hip-Hop*, rapper Icewear Vezzo recalls his excitement at Risher's arrival to shoot photographs of him, stating "Jenny pulled up on us and took a bunch of flicks, she just kept saying pull some money out! You made 'Money Phone,' you gotta pull some cheese out!" "Money Phone," a 2012 Detroit hit song by Icewear Vezzo, paints a picture of Vezzo being unable to answer his phone without it being a call about putting more money in his pocket. In the interview, he states he "only had about 15 grand on him at the time," so he pulled that out. Risher's desire to photograph Vezzo with a stack of money, recalling this former hit song, illustrates the idea of authenticity that Risher wished to capture, and the narratives that she wished to tell surrounding the Detroit hip-hop scene. The authenticity that she sought to capture, however, was arguably based on an already aspirational presentation of self delivered by Vezzo via music video; music videos already rely on various narrative strategies to present specific images of artists to help create their identities (Vernallis 2004). The photograph of Vezzo eventually featured in the exhibit is one of him sitting in the front seat of a classic car, with his arm resting atop the rolled down window, and no money in sight. He was unable to attend the opening of the exhibit, as he turned himself into federal prison about a week after his photoshoot.

On a macro level, artists may have felt a compulsion to appear in photographs out of an obligation to *the culture*, that is, the Detroit hip-hop scene, and the larger discursive global hip-hop community that has long been excluded from spaces of fine art and considered antithetical to the notion of art itself. In a roundtable discussion at the DIA featuring Risher,

curator Nancy Bell, poet and music journalist Kahn Santori Davison, and Nick Speed, Speed spoke of his elation at being photographed - his photograph with longtime collaborator Seven The General actually hung in the DIA before the *D-Cyphered* exhibit existed. “Eventually, when we had our opening...we were the first hip-hop artists on the wall. How long has the DIA been around? Since 1887. And we were the first hip-hop artists on the wall. You know. And I was surprised that we got on there before Eminem!” As Eminem is the most famous rapper from Detroit, Speed’s surprise is warranted.<sup>24</sup> His joy, and the shared joy of the artists featured in the portraits, demonstrates how it can feel to finally be allowed or included in a space that has been historically exclusionary to you and people who look like you. Beyond being photographed, they were displayed for the whole world to see, providing a new avenue of exposure in the space of the venerated DIA, which added a refined sensibility to their artistic offerings. It was as if their years of hard work were finally being noticed on one of the biggest stages - albeit without their musical performance.

### **Exploiting the Margins**

The exhibit confounded in that it introduced a truncated<sup>25</sup> idea of Detroit hip-hop and placed it into the environment of the museum, while presenting it as “the story” of the city’s scene. What exists now in Detroit is a fractured hip-hop scene that is more discursively linked than physically bonded, so placing all these artists together presented a picture of the scene that is cohesive. This manufactured cohesion is best exemplified by Risher’s portrait that riffs on Art Kane’s famous 1958 photograph “A Great Day in Harlem,” which features 57 famous jazz musicians – including Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk –

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<sup>24</sup> I also cannot help but note the dynamics of race that come into play when considering not only Eminem’s global popularity, but the typical configuration of museums as spaces of whiteness. It would have made sense for Eminem’s photograph to precede Speed’s because Eminem is both globally popular and white.

<sup>25</sup> Necessarily so, given that museum exhibits are expected to present coherent ideas but generally do not possess the sheer amount of space (and money) it would take to ever present a “complete” example of a culture.

standing in front of a building. In Risher's portrait, about 40 figures from Detroit hip-hop, house, and R&B music gather on and around the steps of St. Andrew's Hall, a music venue in downtown Detroit that historically has been one of the city's most important spaces for hip-hop. But perhaps it is only in this somewhat manufactured, ruptured space of the museum that an idea of Detroit hip-hop can truly be realized. The museum's presentation of the scene in exhibit format calls into question issues of context – random visitors do not necessarily know that they are getting a rather incomplete picture of Detroit hip-hop.

My observation is similar to critiques of museums for their practice of taking artifacts out of their contexts and ironically presenting them *as in situ*, able to give people a complete idea of a culture of which they have no firsthand knowledge. There are also the potentially exploitative juxtapositions between the assumed upper-class art world of Detroit and the street worlds being featured in the photographs. As museums and similar institutions have been exclusionary since their inception, and boards of directors have only recently concerned themselves with accessibility, the assumption that inhabitants of street worlds do not belong in fine arts spaces has been repeatedly reinforced in the public sphere for centuries. Because of this presumed cleavage between street art and fine art, the decision to hang these portraits in the museum was likely viewed as edgy and somewhat daring by the board of the DIA. According to many of the critiques raised by current employees, recent former employees, and Black Detroit artists, the DIA's attempts at accessible programming have been little more than an attempt at placation, not a true attempt to address issues of systemic racism that permeate the institution. Museum directors and curators use exhibits to transport visitors into a different time and place, via the use of artifacts and placards. Hip-hop is certainly a foreign world to the museum, and the DIA has kept the spaces of Detroit Blackness and Detroit hip-

hop from separate from its own through exclusionary practices, so the museum must import these Black worlds from within its own city. Gentrifiers are often concerned with retaining historical or cultural markers that existed in the space pre-gentrification, to build cultural capital through the idea of authenticity, to participate in social preservation through memorialization, or to gesture towards the act of repatriation (Brown-Saracino 2009). The exhibit should not be considered outside of these larger apparatuses; in essence, *D-Cyphered* was an attempt to give the Detroit Institute of Arts a sort of gritty facade and the appearance of being community-focused. These aims are what made Mic Write's performance such a rupture: he chose to perform songs and poems directly addressing these issues and larger issues of systemic racism in which the institution participates instead of simply performing some songs in the space. *D-Cyphered* allowed visitors to believe they were getting a true Detroit hip-hop experience, accompanied by a mix thoughtfully curated by Nick Speed, without having to truly contend with their role in gentrification or white supremacy. It is perhaps unfair to place that burden on the shoulders of Risher or the artists featured, but it is worth noting that the museum presented the exhibit in such a way that a visitor could go consume some "culture" and leave without considering the exhibit's potentially exploitative nature or considering their own participation in this exploitation.

Museums are spaces of reflection. Sometimes deliberately noted and sometimes not, there is a consensus that visitors will be quiet when in the hallowed space of fine art or stolen artifacts. This is partly because of the associations between class/status and the "right to quiet" (see Novak 2010; Hagood 2011; Blue 2017). The quiet also carries a pragmatic reason: museum floors are often made of highly reflective material, and excessive sound will exponentially add up, creating a loud environment, which is considered not conducive for

learning. Silence is considered necessary for reflection, to say nothing of the way that different cultures interact with art or artistic performances (i.e. Black church traditions sliding into the way jazz is appreciated, but not seeping into the way that “classical” concerts are consumed). Museums are often considered stuffy for these reasons and more, including the presence of docents to explain to observers why they should hold things in high reverence, an overwhelming history of the media portraying “fine art” in a certain light, etc. Museums like the DIA have been working for years to solve the problem of seeming stuffy and therefore exclusive, seeking to be more accessible to the Black community that surrounds it and looking to expand its membership base to stay afloat. They have done this through programming hip-hop, similar to benevolent organizations doing “outreach” by exposure, feeling as if they have done their part to address racism by bringing a class of Black 8th graders to the museum to view artifacts stolen from Africa. While I am a proponent of exposure, and do believe it is good for people to have access to things, in this context it seems a bit nefarious, because it is often an attempt to mold and shape students actions into something that is more “upwardly mobile,” part of the talented tenth (see Du Bois 1903). Students are shown the museum as if it is something for them to aspire to, a way of life that should be a goal<sup>26</sup>.

Museums like the DIA show that gentrification is a long, complicated, protracted process that is not entirely bad but certainly not all good. The greater downtown area of Detroit is involved in a gentrification project - some actors participate willingly, others are resistant, but they are all involved. For the years that I lived in the city, I lived on the periphery of the greater downtown area, in old established neighborhoods that, at the time,

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<sup>26</sup> Though, as I am reminded by George Lipsitz, the capacity of those brought to the museum to reimagine, reinterpret, and subvert what they encounter should not be underestimated.

did not have new construction. However, it did not take more than a few minutes to get to the heart of the city's gentrification zone - Woodward Ave and Cass Ave (parallel streets) and the parts of the streets that ran between them. They had freshly paved roads – rare in Detroit – no potholes, and bike lanes. The “Q,” a very limited and ineffective public transit train, runs up and down Woodward Ave for a couple of miles, meaning one must already be in the downtown area to use it. There are coffee shops galore, bike shops, trendy new restaurants and bars. The further downtown one ventures, the more it turns into a shopping district, with the Nike Store, Moosejaw, and other big brands occupying space along with fancy new hotels with upscale restaurants and bars inside. But if you leave downtown and head north on Woodward, you soon encounter the main branch of the Detroit Public Library (which, like the DIA, boasts a rather impressive art collection and an atrium filled with murals), the Detroit Historical Museum, and the Detroit Institute of Arts - the neighborhood known as Art Center. The DIA is even more connected to the city's gentrification project because of its position during the municipal bankruptcy from 2013 to 2014.

The value of art was considered a worthy bargaining chip to pull the city out of bankruptcy, although creditors had to absorb billions in losses. The years following the emergence from bankruptcy have seen Detroit “rebuild” at an alarming rate, with large corporations and private investors seizing the opportunity to purchase land, buildings, companies, everything they could get their hands on. The DIA, quite literally, helped save the city and create the version of Detroit that we see before us now. Perhaps the inclusion of hip-hop in the DIA is the museum director's attempt at noting that he realizes where they are located, even though the city is seeing an overwhelming amount of white investment. The museum's inclusion of *D-Cyphered* is similar to when new businesses in Detroit get murals

painted on the sides of their building, or do some other sort of appeasement for local artists and residents, attempting to show that they are truly locals. The exhibit was, perhaps, the only way to know you were in Detroit while in the museum which features art from the far reaches of the globe. Detroit appreciation is in vogue in the city and its surrounding suburbs, a way to demonstrate allyship without having to do heavy lifting. *D-Cyphered* could be presented as a community space, further evinced by the presence of comment cards; the responses on the cards did show that members of the community appreciated the exhibit, a chance to see themselves reflected in a space that has been historically exclusionary. But the exhibit was gone in a matter of months, contributing to the hypermobility already experienced by the Detroit hip-hop scene with several significant hip-hop focused venues closing over the last 25 years.

One of the chilling things about the display of Black art or Black culture at the museum is that it is beholden to the decisions of overwhelmingly white gatekeepers. They determine which pieces of Black culture are sanitary enough for the museum environment, and which are too “unfriendly” for view. Anything that calls Black realities into question is expected to do so in a manner that is safe and sanitary for audiences, as determined by said gatekeepers in a way that “really makes you think,” as it were. Displays are expected to inspire a bit of tough self-reflection that allows someone to say “wow, that’s so sad,” before moving on with their day and with their life. The political economy is important to consider, from the museum director, to the curator who tapped Risher for the exhibit, to Risher deciding who would be included and who would not (which was also partially bound to who she could access, using a lot of Nick Speed’s contacts, etc.). While it is obviously impossible to include every Detroit hip-hop artist in an exhibit as new ones appear every day, some are



deceased, etc., a clear image of Detroit hip-hop is created by the photographer who has images of Kid Rock and Insane Clown Posse in the same space as Big Sean, Trick Trick, and House Shoes - presumably artists who would not be occupying the same physical spaces in real life. The still life presentation of Detroit hip-hop via gatekeepers also does the damage of forcing the hand of Black artists who obviously want to be respected, but apparently must be visible to white people with money to do so. As Langston Collin Wilkins writes in

*StreetFolk:*

Black cultural spaces exist in isolation until they produce something that white people desire. White people rarely enter them until there is something they want to enjoy and eventually control. They exploit structural inequalities by using their capital, connections, and other resources (like our grants/philanthropic culture) to control artists and art forms. They become gatekeepers. Sometimes they're scholars, experts, agents, managers, documentarians or non-profit heads. Access goes through them. They create organizations for these traditions and then only hire other white people...This is a process of cultural extraction. White gatekeepers use their resources to present these Black traditions to monied white audiences. They present performances, showcases and symposium in spaces far removed from the Black community. And it's not that there's a lack of spaces in the Black community. It's because the cultural sector is dependent on the white gaze. The goal is to bring the margins to the mainstream because the mainstream won't go to the margins. (Wilkins 2020)

I return to the comment cards. The comment from the 57-year-old who claimed to suddenly want to listen to hip-hop because of observing the portraits is not inherently evil, but it raises questions about observation, voyeurism, and access. One cannot assume that this person, at the age of fifty-seven, had no encounters with hip-hop before entering the DIA. It is far more likely that the person actively chose to ignore or dislike hip-hop – they were only

interested in consumption when it was deemed worthy of being in a museum. To reiterate Wilkins' words, "we operate in a system where white gatekeepers present Black culture for the white gaze." The comment cards also featured some rhetoric that could be interpreted as gatekeeping, presumably from people within the Detroit hip-hop scene. One card called Jenny and the museum "wild" for including an image of Kid Rock in the exhibit, a man who made a career off of extracting Black culture and reconfiguring it with a "redneck" veneer to make it more consumable for a white audience. The presence of Nick Speed's curated soundtrack should also be mentioned. For one, it is atypical to have music playing in a museum exhibit (though it was playing at a soft volume). But the music playing in the exhibit was far different from the music Nick would typically play during times I visited his studio. One was not going to hear "the 'n' word" while in the DIA exhibit. It was a sanitized, safe version of Detroit hip-hop that could be considered "kid-friendly" but, more importantly, friendly to the museum's wealthy donors and benefactors. Against this version of Black sound presented by the museum, Mic Write's performance stands out even further, sounding a Black Detroitness within a changing, "rewhitenizing" Detroit – a Black spatial intervention into the white spatial imaginary. The effects of the museum, including gentrification, and the spatial violence that it enacts, are not uniquely Detroit problems. But the way that Detroit artists respond to these problems is specific to the problems faced in that city. Mic Write's performances reveal a shared transformational logic of creation that employs various techniques like flipping via performance to remain present and thriving in a gentrifying city that increasingly moves to remove the presence of its marginalized population in favor of the wealthy and white-collar. These practices in Detroit hip-hop demonstrate the resilience and

drive of artists who continue existing and creating in the city, showing that in Detroit, you're only ever a block from the 'hood.

## 2. Killing The Noise: Gentrification, Sound, and Policing

Just a few miles outside of downtown, on Detroit's Near East Side, rests a historic district and neighborhood known as West Village. Mostly located between Jefferson, Kercheval, Parker, and Seyburn avenues, the area is overwhelmingly residential. In the midst of the houses and apartment buildings lie two prominent retail strips, both of which attract shoppers and diners from all over the city and its surrounding suburbs. One sits on the edge of the neighborhood, a small stretch of Kercheval Avenue near Parker Street that features businesses such as the corner bakery Sister Pie that opened in 2015, and Marrow, a semi-upscale bistro and butcher shop that opened in 2018 and has consistently been atop lists of the city's best restaurants. The other commercial area is concentrated into one short block of Agnes Street, between Van Dyke, which is one of the neighborhood's busiest streets, and Parker. This block hosts hip local businesses like Detroit Vegan Soul, Red Hook Coffee (named after the neighborhood in Brooklyn that the owner once called home), and Craft Work Bar and Restaurant. Small businesses like these have popped up all over the city since 2014 in the wake of the Grand Bargain; their existence does not necessarily set the neighborhood apart from others across the city. The primary reason I came to know this neighborhood was through my attendance at a free, monthly hip-hop producer night, known as "The Beat Profile," that took place at a record shop called Paramita Sound.

The Beat Profile occurred the last Friday of every month and featured local producers, beatmakers<sup>27</sup>, a house DJ spinning or playing tracks between billed

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<sup>27</sup> Beatmakers are differentiated from producers in that they create beats, but do not take part in the mixing or mastering of a complete track in the way producers typically do.

performers' sets, and the occasional emcee or live band. It was one of several Detroit hip-hop nights I attended during my fieldwork that focused almost entirely on beats and not on rap, but it was the only one that happened monthly, year-round. The biggest, most internationally-famous names in Detroit hip-hop production had all played sets there at some point: Apollo Brown, Black, SKYWALKER, Nick Speed, Shigeto, and many others. In the week leading up to the event, the shop would post digital flyers to their social media accounts, both announcing the show's lineup and building buzz around it. The centerpiece of the room on those nights was the shop's checkout counter, a partition connected to the room's back wall that was effectively transformed into a booth for the producers, beatmakers, and DJs to set up their equipment. Two large speakers were set up on either side of the somewhat small room to deliver the sound – it did not take much volume to fill the room, but the volume was always turned up high. The white wall directly behind the DJ booth featured the shop's logo, but served as a makeshift projector screen during The Beat Profile - projections of everything from Kung Fu movies to Nintendo games would loop in the background while DJs spun, producers played their beats, and emcees rapped. Being in that room felt similar to the idealized image of the Detroit hip-hop scene that I had before moving to the city – it seemed so quintessentially contemporary Detroit to me - a racially diverse, tight-knit, enthusiastic group of people, hanging out in a reclaimed/repurposed space, listening and moving to beats, feeling good through their communion. The Beat Profile seemed the perfect embodied and sounded display of shop owner Andrey Douthard's professed goal to use Paramita Sound as a space for the creation and maintenance of community. Though I was usually able to attend every month, I was out of town for a couple of the

shows that happened during the summer of 2017, but managed to get back to town for the August Beat Profile. Still settling in to being back in town, I was a bit tired when the show started and did not stay for the entire time. Thus, it came as a complete surprise to me on August 26<sup>th</sup> of that year when this post appeared on all the record shop's social media accounts:

For thirty one months straight, we've been throwing a party at the record store called the Beat Profile. Off jump, the party has been free, all ages, and inclusive to everybody whether you live on the block or you're in town from Berlin. The relationships formed inside these walls for the last thirty one months have led to unparalleled collaboration across the board. A community was born here. It has not - not once - led to violence. Last night, seven squad cars arrived at the record shop and closed down Van Dyke while nine men in uniform stormed the building and surrounding area. This neighborhood has been changing, all of us know that. But the increase in police activity is directly proportionate to the rise of luxury housing and ruthless gentrification of this area. First and foremost, fuck the police. Seven squad cars pulled up to an independently owned community space hosting an all ages free party attended mostly by people of color and native to the very city that is currently set up to alienate them - responding to NOISE COMPLAINTS. Our hearts break for the execution and white washing of culture here in Detroit. SHAME ON YOU FOR CALLING THE COPS BECAUSE OF MUSIC. We don't know what kind of neighborhood our neighbors are looking for anymore, but we understand it might not be one with a record store. What we do know is Paramita is more than this address. From day one, we set out to control our own narrative inside of a city that's rapidly changing. This might be the beginning of a very new part of our story. Support each other emotionally financially and socially now and always - we are stronger than them - 1417 now and forever #detroit (paramitasound Instagram post, August 26, 2017; emphasis in original)

As noted by Imani Mixon (2017) of the *Detroit Metro Times*, this dustup at Paramita Sound was part of an emerging pattern of police intervening and responding to noise complaints

in the more revitalized portions of the city. According to Nixon, the “army of police officers that showed up at the store this summer are one change [to the neighborhood]. But the issue is not just confined to the West Village: throughout the city, there is evidence to suggest a growing preoccupation with preserving Detroit's marketability for visitors and newcomers. And as part of that appeal, the city has begun to crack down on noise.”

Mixon's article and Paramita Sound's post demonstrate the strong link between gentrification and policing occurring in the city. Beyond this, implicit in Nixon's statement about preserving Detroit's marketability is the insinuation of a further devaluation of Black (or perceived Black) spaces and sounds in a hierarchy that has always situated whiteness at the top. Under the force of “ruthless gentrification” to which Paramita Sound's post refers, “culture” is being both killed and white washed in the city and disproportionate policing is a catalyst. Businesses must be legible, audible, as white - or, at the very least, their Blackness must be curated, controlled, adaptable for and acceptable to white audiences - in order to be desirable to the newcomers the city hopes to attract: young, white, middle-class, white-collar professionals.

In this chapter, I follow a noise complaint and its aftermath to explore the complex web that connects gentrification, sound, noise, and policing in contemporary Detroit. I open with larger discussions of gentrification that have long existed in the humanities and social sciences since Ruth Glass's coining of the term in 1964. I demonstrate that gentrification - often thought of as unidirectional - is a complicated process with a lot of push and pull. Various actors have different things at stake, and I engage with scholarly work on gentrification that asks questions of who counts as the gentrifier and who is the gentrified. Additionally, in cities and neighborhoods with large Black populations, gentrification is

often viewed as a Black/white issue, and writing on the topic generally focuses on issues of displacement. A broader look at gentrification reveals a far more complicated process. I then move to discuss some Detroit-specific gentrification issues, such as the conversion of vacant lots into so-called “greenspace.” As my primary case study, I analyze and interpret the build up and aftermath of police responding heavily to a noise complaint called in against the monthly hip-hop night at Paramita Sound. I show that noise is an increasingly important category in the policing of Black bodies in Detroit, and noise complaints are a byproduct of gentrification in urban areas. While death in this chapter is largely metaphorical, the uneven enforcement of noise ordinances on Black sounds and Black business has been referred to as “noise killing” and even “cultural execution” by those affected. This chapter joins a larger ongoing discourse around sonic racialization and policing that remains crucial for understanding and undoing white supremacy in the US.

## **Gentrification**

Writing about the phenomenon of upper and lower middle class people “invading” the working-class quarters that she observed taking place in London, Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” in 1964. Although yet to be coined with a singular term, ‘gentrification’ had been happening long before Glass’s observations in the 1950s and 60s, and many of the traits of gentrification that she observed were, in part, happening across the globe during the era immediately following World War II. For instance the conversion of large, single-family homes into multiple apartments and houselets was happening in large global cities, like Detroit, throughout the 1940s (Sugrue [1996] 2005). But whereas many of these postwar building conversions occurred to fit more blue collar workers into urban areas with limited space, the process to which Glass refers is different. The injection



of class difference – middle class people moving into working class spaces – and the rising of housing costs as a result of it seemed to be a new twist in an urban development equation that had been going on for decades and was centered on concentrations of class (and racial/ethnic) homogeneity. Glass noted that “once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed” (Glass [1964] 2010: 22-23).

In the years following Glass’s *Aspects of Change* (1964), gentrification has been a frequent focus of scholars in numerous fields, urban planners, politicians, journalists, artists, and everyday folks. While an overwhelming amount of gentrification discourse has focused on the displacement of long-time residents, or on the assumed chasm between the “gentrified” and the “gentrifier,” Japonica Brown-Saracino brings attention to the numerous debates concerning multiple facets of gentrification that have taken place within academic studies of the topic (2010). She identifies four gentrification focus areas around which there has been the most disagreement within the academy: how to define and recognize gentrification; how, where, and when gentrification occurs; gentrifiers’ characteristics and motivations for engaging in the process; and gentrification’s outcomes and consequences. Brown-Saracino is careful, however, to lay out the various disagreements without taking a particular stance on any; her goal is to illuminate just how messy and multifaceted of a topic gentrification has been since the term was coined. While all of the noted points of disagreement are important and worthy of much discussion, from what I have experienced, outside of academia there is generally shared public opinion on what gentrification is, and though there may be differences in opinion over the how, there

is agreement on the where and when of the occurrence of gentrification. It has been very thoroughly linked to the issues of systemic racism and racial inequality. To that end, the ‘what’ of gentrification is typically defined as the economic, social, or cultural displacement of marginalized populations to make way for upscale housing, dining, and shopping options for the middle and upper class; the understanding of when and where has focused almost solely on cities, post recession (2007-2009). Displacement is perhaps the most focused upon aspect of gentrification. This public understanding of gentrification is evident through countless articles in a wide array of publications from film reviews in *Vanity Fair* (Collins 2019; Desta 2020), to countless pieces of investigative journalism in the *New York Times* (Yee 2015; Matsuda 2018; Badger, Bui, and Gebeloff 2019, etc.), to thought-provoking features in *Teen Vogue* (Lee 2020; Mallett 2020). One can even find an article on gentrification, race, and policing in *Playboy* (Corcione 2018). All of these articles focus on displacement, and nearly all are focused on urban areas.

What is not so straightforward is everyday opinion or any agreed-upon definition of what makes and motivates a gentrifier, and what the outcomes of gentrification happen to be. Because of the link between gentrification and systemic racism, one may be led to assume that gentrifiers are white people who move into neighborhoods populated by marginalized peoples, and the outcome of gentrification is the disenfranchisement and displacement of these marginalized people through rising property values, the loss of important cultural centers, etc. But a look at the aforementioned articles or conversations with people about gentrification – whether they live in an area that is considered to be gentrifying or not – reveal public disagreement over who gentrifies and what really happens to an area that is gentrified.

In *Harlem: Between Heaven and Hell* (2002), Monique Taylor approaches the concept of Black gentrifiers, members of a Black middle class moving back to the city for a number of explicit and implicit reasons. She finds that her interlocutors express a range of objectives through their moves to Harlem, from a desire to reconnect with Black revolutionary roots, to a commitment to community building, to a wish to be around more Black people and thus experience far less racism than they encountered when living around white people. She reveals that conversations around gentrification and redevelopment often quickly turn into discussions about race. Taylor writes, “anti-development rhetoric moves race to a central location, the invasion by gentry is understood as a white-versus-black issue,” noting that the “community is energized as a collective body when new life is breathed into old enemies—‘whites,’ ‘outsiders,’ ‘the city.’ Caught in a familiar tangle of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ Harlem girds itself against vaguely defined villains” (Taylor 2002: 60). Taylor finds that race seems to supersede notions of gentrification and anti-development rhetoric; Black gentrifiers were often greeted warmly by long-time residents, quickly treated as insiders because of their belonging to the community along racial lines. This trend of not recognizing class difference when there is an apparent racial community can potentially undermine anti-gentrification movements. Additionally, it allows the people moving in to see themselves as separate from the issue of gentrification, somehow not responsible for changes that might come to the neighborhood after they arrive.

### **Gentrification in Detroit**

In *There Goes The 'Hood* (2006), Lance Freeman seeks to address concerns around gentrification’s outcomes from the perspective of Black residents in the Clinton Hill and

Harlem neighborhoods of New York, asserting that these perspectives had often been overlooked in the literature up to that point. Throughout his study, Freeman highlights the many seeming contradictions that exist between residents' opinions – some view gentrification with a great deal of optimism as a chance for upward mobility without needing to move to suburbia, while others are far more pessimistic, noticing that the city and private investors are only interested in helping neighborhoods after they have white people in them. For instance, Freeman finds that some there are Black residents in favor of gentrification because of their financial self-interests: Black homeowners stand to benefit from a rise in property values, as the value of their homes will increase. Conversely, renters, or those more community focused, expressed fears around displacement that seem to reverberate in the majority of anti-gentrification critiques or protests. While Freeman does show a multitude of perspectives on gentrification, his book skews a bit towards residents who view gentrification optimistically. But a noticeable feature of Freeman's study is his frequent invocation of indigeneity when talking about gentrification. Without critiquing or even qualifying his use of the term, he employs a settler colonialist framework throughout his text, constantly referring to the long-time residents of neighborhoods as "indigenous;" Freeman uses "gentry" as the shorthand for would-be colonizers. As Jessi Quizar (2019) has shown in her work on Detroit, settler logics and the language of colonialism have been used to critique gentrification, but are inaccurate and proliferate the ideas of frontierism and pioneering that are often used to justify or reframe gentrification, particularly in the Motor City.

Jessi Quizar finds that "the metaphorical indigenization of Black people, while taking place through a rhetoric of anti-colonialism, actually echoes colonizing strategies"

(Quizar 2019: 114), and sets out to interrogate why the language of settler colonialism and colonialist logics are being applied to Detroit so often. As Quizar notes, “public discourse lauding Detroit’s comeback [has] echoed narratives of westward expansion,” and one of the main narratives is the way that a “city of almost 700,000 people has been portrayed frequently in the last decade as being empty, being taken over by nature, and essentially evacuated of people” (2019: 122). To some extent, it is easy to see how these narratives take shape – in a thickly-populated urban area in the US, one would typically not see families of pheasants, deer, and an occasional pack of wild dogs roaming the streets as I did from my apartment during the course of my fieldwork. Yet these depictions of Detroit do more than create a mystique around the idea of an untamed frontier – this discourse conceals the displacements that often accompany gentrification, and they make gentrification seem less impactful on people’s lives. The presentation of Detroit as uninhabited land allows gentrification to seem heroic. As Quizar writes, it also presents Detroit as ready for reinvestment and capitalist exploitation:

Portrayals of Detroit as empty, violent, and “fallen” also lend themselves toward a sense that the city must be “saved”: from its residents, who are portrayed as both violent and negligent (or not portrayed at all); from nature (in the form of “vacant” lots being taken back by nature); and, crucially, from unproductivity. The idea of salvation from unproductivity is especially salient in narratives of Detroit’s “comeback,” which tend to define comeback largely as Detroit becoming productive for capitalism, both in terms of a growth in business and in terms of a reincorporation of land into capitalist property markets. (2019: 125)

Like Quizar, I argue that it is through these views of Detroit as fallen and in need of salvation from violence, nature, and unproductivity that gentrification in Detroit takes place, and that the language used in these efforts has led to anti-gentrification movements’

attempts to adopt anti-colonial language.

Conversely, and in strange dialogue with rhetoric of taming the wild, both city-led (publicly-funded) and commercially-led (mostly privately-funded, with some state contribution or incentives) gentrification efforts in Detroit have increasingly sought to deploy the language and strategies of “greening” and ecoconsciousness. The streetcar system known as the QLine (so named because Quicken Loans bought the naming rights to the project) opened in May of 2017, and spans 3.4 miles down Woodward Avenue. Though critiqued and openly mocked by many Detroiters for its inaccessibility and impracticality – the streetcar only goes down one street, meaning that getting to destinations not on Woodward, or even accessing the system itself, may require transportation that potential users do not have – the QLine was built with the intention of providing clean transportation to downtown workplaces and destinations, thereby getting cars off the road and lowering carbon emissions. Around the same time that the QLine opened, a new esplanade opened in Downtown Detroit at the end of the Q’s route, backed by a \$400,000 investment from Quicken Loans (Runyan 2017). The esplanade features swings and flexible seating, art installations, and large arches over a walkway that cuts through the green space. In 2019, the city broke ground on the Joseph Campau Greenway, which is another in a long list of the city’s investments in a non-motorized infrastructure that has seen the span of bike lanes grow from 13 miles in 2007 to almost 250 miles in 2020 (Mondry 2019). Though the Detroit City Council oscillated on whether to make permanent a downtown pedestrian plaza that was launched as a pilot program in 2017, in the Summer of 2019, the council voted to make Spirit Plaza a permanent fixture of downtown and unveiled an \$800,000 upgrade plan for the space (Mondry 2019). The plaza

features seating, green space, art installations, and an easier path for pedestrians to cross from downtown to Hart Plaza, which sits on the waterfront of the Detroit River. Ironically, this pedestrian plaza sits in the shadow of the massive Renaissance Center, a structure of seven connected skyscrapers that is owned by General Motors and serves as their world headquarters. In a city that rose to prominence because of the fortunes of the auto industry, Spirit Plaza is directly in front of the iconic statue known as the Spirit of Detroit.

In *Greening the Black Urban Regime* (2020), Alesia Montgomery highlights the many differing opinions and conflicts between long-time residents and newcomers, or Black people and white people, when it comes to gentrification and environmental concerns in Detroit. Montgomery finds that much of the greening of Detroit, laden with the language of justice, represents the unfulfilled promises of spatial agency for Black citizens, due to decision making resting in the hands (and wallets) of corporations and private foundations. But as Montgomery notes, there are Black people in favor of the way the city is changing:

Not all supporters of the new Detroit are white gentrifiers; there are new and longtime black residents who—tired of the decades of scorn that Detroit has suffered—embrace the change. A black fashion designer’s downtown shop, serving environmentally and socially conscious consumers, proudly states on its window: “Détroit Is The New Black.” To explain why some black Detroiters support the new regime, one must admit that developers and foundations have brought some beneficial changes to Detroit’s streetscape. Market-driven green redevelopment makes steps toward climate change mitigation and adaptation, increases foot traffic in depressed commercial areas, and expands opportunities for some black professionals, entrepreneurs, and artists. Some middle-income residents enjoy better places to shop, and some low-income residents get fresh produce from new charities. (2020: 22)

However, as Montgomery also writes, racial, economic, and social disparities abound in Detroit, regardless of how green the city becomes. The injection of capital into the downtown area has not only driven up the area's property values, it has siphoned money and services away from many of the low-income, predominantly Black neighborhoods outside of downtown. It cannot go unnoticed that the city center is enjoying a new eco-friendly gentrification and economic boom while many of Detroit's low-income citizens face environmental threats like the mass water shutoffs that have been occurring for over a decade.

## **Noise and Policing**

Within spaces, places, and systems built upon white supremacist logics, Black sounds have always been policed. Evidence of this is found throughout the history of the Transatlantic enslavement trade. Peoples from various locales in Africa were suddenly sutured together under the banner of "African" and forced to create a cohesive culture for any chance of survival. They spoke disparate languages and were unable to communicate with each other, unless they sacrificed their tongue in favor of English, French, Portuguese, or whatever the language of the captor happened to be. Their individual religious practices were banned, making them unable to worship in the way they had for their whole lives. Their instruments were confiscated or destroyed. It is through these dire, hyperpoliced circumstances that many of the most celebrated enslavement era performance practices were birthed: capoeira, the Ring Shout, the shuffle, and pattin' Juba. A litany of sounded and embodied practices relied on what can be considered 'masking,' hiding the true intention of something, using code to convey real meanings. As Eileen Southern, Portia Maultsby, Amiri Baraka, and others have noted, spirituals and



work songs sung by the enslaved were often laced with these codes, some serving as protest song, some as maps to the underground railroad. It is clear that colonists understood the power of sound to inspire collective action, which, as Jon Cruz (1999) notes, led to some sounds being policed, but utterances like work songs being required.

Black musical sounds in the US have been policed on numerous occasions. The birth of the recording industry saw the creation of “Race Records” as a category to ensure the separation of Black sounds from the sounds of others. As many scholars have evinced, music often served as a bridge of sorts between Black and white people (Lott 1993; Radano 2003; etc.). But as William G. Roy (2004) notes, music was also used to set boundaries, via Race Records. Roy writes, “Insofar as blacks were excluded from participation in white forms of music, offered only the kinds of music that marketers thought appropriate for blacks, and categorized in racially coded categories by white tastemakers, music served the larger segregation projects that whites were undertaking” (2004: 269). Gillian Frank (2007) writes of “discophobia,” the large scale cultural backlash against disco, which was an overwhelmingly Black and queer music of the very late 1960s and 1970s. While Frank is largely focused on antigay sentiments in this backlash, she notes that some of the ire disco garnered from white men was due to associations with Blackness, queerness, and the intersection of the two. This push against disco publicly bubbled over in an event now known as Disco Demolition Night that occurred in 1979. Organized by Steve Dahl, a rock radio DJ in Chicago, the infamous event featured the mass destruction of disco records at Chicago’s Comiskey Park baseball stadium, and it quickly turned into a public display of destruction, with some attendees setting fires within the ballpark. As Tricia Rose writes in *Black Noise* (1994), hip-hop, since its inception, has been subject to struggles for space

through a “complex web of institutional policing” (Rose 1994: 124). Additionally, hip-hop has often come under fire for its lyrical content. As scholars have revealed, complaints against themes in rock and hip-hop led to the creation and widespread application of the Recording Industry Association of America’s (RIAA) Parental Advisory label on albums (Binder 1993; Chastagner 1999); the banning of albums from the radio (Binder 1993); and, in the case of groups like Public Enemy or N.W.A., government intervention and surveillance (Nielson 2010). The production process of hip-hop has also been policed, as claims of copyright infringement were (and continuously are) levelled against performers for improperly sampling previously recorded material (Sharma 1999; Marshall 2006). A music that was stylistically reliant on digital technology to sample and rearrange bits of music that came before, the entire style was forced to adapt, lest they be sued. Biz Markie released *All Samples Cleared!* in 1993, a reference to his fateful 1991 court case vs. Gilbert O’Sullivan that would change the hip-hop industry forever.

Beyond music, Black sounds are policed in increasingly nefarious and physically dangerous ways, from the social and cultural, to the state-sponsored, to the extrajudicial. In 2015, a group of eleven women - all but one of them Black - was kicked off a Napa Valley Wine Train for being too loud, with workers saying the women’s laughter had drawn complaints from other guests. They were escorted through six train cars, met by police officers, and given a bus ride back to the train station. The hashtag #laughingwhileblack was created shortly thereafter, so that others could share similar stories (Rhodan 2015). The same year, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Oakland, California, was threatened with a \$3500 fine and penalties of \$500 a day after neighbors complained about excessive noise coming

from church choir rehearsals (Ramos 2015). In 2012, a Black teenager named Jordan Davis was murdered by Michael Dunn, a white man, who was upset over the volume of the music coming from the vehicle in which Davis and his friends were riding. Having testified to his hatred of what he called “rap crap,” or “thug music” according to his girlfriend, Dunn felt he had the right to take matters into his own hands and end Davis’ life (Luscombe 2014). Black people even self-police their sounds, out of fear of outcomes like these; in 2017, I wrote of the use of noise-cancelling headphones by Black athletes as a means of self-maintenance and interiority reification.<sup>28</sup> Black sounds are policed because Black life is policed. The same is true in Detroit, which has its own history of policing Black sounds that are often interpreted as noise.

## **Noise In Detroit**

Depending on who you ask, the 1967 Detroit uprising started because of the Detroit Police Department responding to loud noises emanating from a “blind pig,” or unlicensed bar, on 12th Street (Boissoneault 2017). What many accounts agree upon is that a number of police officers showed up at the establishment just after 3 a.m., raided the establishment, and began arresting everyone they could. A crowd began to gather around the scene, and property destruction began shortly thereafter. A different type of sound policing was occurring in Detroit during the same era – Berry Gordy’s policing of the sounds and images of the artists on his label, Motown Records. Gordy famously wanted to make music that was apolitical, as if that was a possibility in the time and place he existed, or ever (Smith 1999). Given his oft espoused desire to make Black music that was appealing to a white crowd, he kept tight control over the music released by his

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<sup>28</sup> Blue V, A. (2017). “Hear What You Want”: Sonic Politics, Blackness, and Racism-Canceling Headphones. *Current Musicology*, (99/100)

artists, shelving records like Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” in favor of feel-good party music.<sup>29</sup> In my first chapter, I discussed the occasional inclusion of hip-hop in the community-focused programming offered by the Detroit Institute of Arts. These displays are generally policed, curated in museum terms, to fit within certain narratives the museum and its donors wish to promote, whether the musicians or the music have similar goals or not. Allowing in a performance without policing it can lead to performances like those of Mic Write. But it has been the massive waves of gentrification hitting the city of Detroit that have led to a rising form of Black sound policing: literal police responses to noise complaints. A rise in low-level policing is a common marker of gentrification (Beck 2020). That sounds in Black spaces or Black sounds in white spaces are disproportionately policed in comparison to sounds in other spaces is an example of this.

Chapter 16 of Detroit’s Municipal Code covers the “Environment,” and the first article within this chapter is on the subject of “Noise.” The section begins with a number of definitions meant to apply to specific terms within the section: ‘emergency services,’ “essential services,” “motor vehicle,” “person,” etc. While there is not a specific definition of noise, *Motor vehicle noise* is defined as “any sounds emitted from a motor vehicle, either by its physical or electrical components, or by noise-emitting instruments or devices within it that are plainly audible at a distance greater than ten feet from the motor vehicle.” *Non-motor vehicle noise* is defined as “sounds emitted from any source other than a motor vehicle that can be attributed to a person that is plainly audible within 50 feet of its source.” To call any sounds emitted *noise*, based on proximity, is a tenuous standard. For one, there is likely no way to determine a standard for the “plainly audible,”

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<sup>29</sup> Notably, even songs Gordy or Motown artists intended as party music could become revolutionary anthems, e.g., Martha and the Vandellas’ “Dancing In The Street” (1964).

and if there was, the standard would be completely subjective. How would one judge this plain audibility as it changes over distance – could something be plainly audible at nine feet, eleven inches from a motor vehicle, then suddenly not with the addition of an inch of distance? This poor definition is further expressed in the definition of non-motor vehicle noise being plainly audible *within* 50 feet of its source; it would follow that a sound plainly audible at 51 feet is no longer non-motor vehicle noise. The code states specifically:

It is unlawful to engage in, assist in, permit, continue or permit in the continuance of any of the following activities within City limits where the activity produces non-motor vehicle noise between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. unless exempted by Section 16-1-14 of this Code:

The performance or reproduction of music through vocals, musical instrument or instruments, speakers of any type, music players, televisions, or mobile devices;

The amplification or reproduction of speech through use of a microphone, megaphone, bullhorn, any other sound magnification device; or

The use of any steam or compressed air whistles or sirens.

The exemption to which the code refers is for emergency and essential services, things like sirens, fire alarms, and the like. What can be gleaned from the municipal code on noise is that the concept is fairly undefined, leaving it wide open to interpretation, which in turn leaves the application of penalties - noise violations are considered misdemeanors and carry penalties ranging from fines to jail time - open to interpretation. The police in Detroit are not patrolling around, listening for noise. They respond to specific complaints, in specific neighborhoods, in a non-standardized fashion. Often, they respond to noise complaints about Black sounds in increasingly gentrifying areas.

Searching for the distinction between sound and noise seems to be wholly reliant on decibel level, based on the vague definitions in the municipal code. As David Novak

(Novak and Sakakeeny 2015: 126) notes, “at the right decibel level, anything, regardless of its original source, can become noise.” He goes on to posit that noise itself is not a distinct sound, but a larger discourse on sound and how we interpret it, noting that as it was “brought further into social consciousness, its recognition contributed to the inexorable fragmentation and privatization of urban space, through zoning, sonic surveillance, and acoustic shielding from public noise (ibid: 129).” My search for the distinction between noise and sound, then, is centered in the *becoming*, the how and when a sound suddenly makes the transition into noise. The municipal codes would have one believe that this transition is based solely on distance traveled (to say nothing of decibel levels, hearing sensitivity, or anything else that may affect such a reading). However, it seems more likely that sounds are interpreted as noises when they are unwanted. In a gentrifying city, the noises are often unwanted Black sounds, and Black sounds are audible as Black along the *sonic color line*.

Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s *The Sonic Color Line* (2016) shows how “the listening ear” is host to a number of deeply-embedded racialized listening practices, and that sound and listening take an active role in the production of racial politics in the US and beyond. Stoever defines the sonic color line as the “process of racializing sound— how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds— and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’” (2016: 7). It is through this process and the accrual of dominant listening practices over time – what Stoever terms “the listening ear” - that sounded Blackness becomes noise. Stoever writes:

I consider noise a shifting analytic that renders certain sounds  
— and the bodies that produce and consume them — as

Other, what Cornel West describes as “incomprehensible and unintelligible” under white supremacist epistemologies...the sonic color line invokes noise in direct connection to (or as a metonymic stand-in for) people of color, and particularly blackness. The sound of hip-hop pumped at top volume through car speakers, for example, has become a stand-in for the bodies of young black men in American culture; noise ordinances seeking to “tame the boom car monster” — words used in Rochester, New York — allow for racial profiling without ever explicitly mentioning race. Sometimes tolerated, but more often fetishized as exotic or demonized as unassimilable, noise and loudness frequently function as aural substitutes for and markers of race. (2016: 12-13)

Mack Hagood (2011) makes a similar assertion that noise is Othered sound, noting that the “perception of noise is socially constructed and situated in hierarchies of race, class, age, and gender (2011: 574).” As Stoeveer writes, it is the sonic color line that invokes noise as a stand-in for that Other, for Blackness. Noise complaints in gentrified areas can be seen as appeals to racial control of newly gentrified or gentrifying spaces - calling in the police to kill the noise ensures that the area will maintain a sense of whiteness.

## **Paramita Sound**

Paramita Sound was a record store, born in 2014 out of a small business grant and a dream to combine owner Andrey Douthard’s love of music and community in one central location. The shop still exists but has relocated. The business opened after Douthard won a grant competition called Activate 1417 Van Dyke, a contest specifically meant to bring a small business to *that* physical address to help revitalize the block, and, eventually, the neighborhood (Crace 2015). Located in a beautiful house, Paramita Sound had a small, meticulously curated collection of records propped up against the walls in a cozy front room visible as soon as customers entered. Though I went to the shop multiple times over the course of three years, I was always struck by how small both the room and the

displayed collection of records for sale happened to be. In the back of the house was a small listening lounge, where you could put needle to wax and decide if you *really* wanted to purchase that vinyl and take it home - or you could instantly celebrate the purchase you made by utilizing a house turntable to throw your own listening party.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this area of West Village was once home to a number of Black businesses, including the vaunted Harlequin Cafe/Columbine's, a French fine dining restaurant and jazz venue on the ground level of a residential building that hosted live music late into the night without noise complaints throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Paramita Sound could itself be considered part of the initial wave of post-bankruptcy gentrification in the neighborhood. Though the shop did host events like The Beat Profile, and the owner often spoke of it being a community center and keeping the community intact, the business existed in that space because of private funding and small "revitalization" grants aimed at flipping the neighborhood.

In the West Village neighborhood, and across the city of Detroit, some sounds - particularly Black sounds - have been increasingly interpreted by new residents as noise. Based in Downtown Detroit, a once popular nightlife spot called Centre Park Bar faced a number of noise complaints, which the owner alleged was both because the city wanted to buy the building and because of the bar's mostly Black clientele (Dietz and Ainsworth 2017). His allegation was strengthened by the fact that similar loud drinking establishments in the area did not receive the same attention from the Detroit Police Department. When this point was raised, the general response from the city was that the other places had the "proper permits" and his did not. Yet, were this the truth, there would theoretically be a more even application of police response to noise complaints; there



would likely be more noise complaints made as well. The intense police responses seemed to only occur at Black spaces that produced Black sounds. The demographics of the people filing complaints against Centre Park Bar or Paramita Sound are unknown - it cannot be assumed that white people called in the complaints. What is observable in Detroit, and confirmed by numerous comments from various research consultants, is that the police have much more of a tendency to respond to a noise complaint in a gentrifying area than they do to areas of the city that are not. The bar is now shuttered, and the owner filed a lawsuit against the city and the DPD that has remained active for years (Hunter 2018). Paramita Sound sat across the street from a frequently noisy beer garden that, to my knowledge, did not receive any noise complaints from neighborhood residents. It was through their investment in an outwardly sounded Blackness that Paramita Sound could hold the positionality of the *gentrified*, rather than the *gentrifier*, even though they entered the neighborhood via small business grants and awards created for the purpose of “revitalization.” As increased policing is a common artifact of gentrification, and Black sounds via hip-hop are often reduced to the category of “noise,” Paramita Sound was able to view the noise complaints and police response against them as gentrification in action.

Paramita Sound had no parking lot; there was only street parking on Van Dyke and throughout the neighborhood. No matter how far away I had to park, even when I showed up “late,” I never had more than a three-minute walk. The Beat Profile starts to hit you before you walk into the shop. Walking up to the house, there were always people outside on the sidewalk and steps in front, smoking cigarettes and weed, catching up, giving their eardrums a short break from the loudness of the room, giving their bodies a rest from the claustrophobia (Paramita Sound’s front room was already small to begin with; filling it

with bodies clearly exacerbated this). I could always hear the music from the street - more so in the summer than the winter, as they'd only have the screen door closed then. The thump of sampled kick drums and the rattle of sub bass have a way of reaching out and touching you, gently at first, then grabbing you and daring you to try changing your focus. I would give a few head nods and acknowledgments as I walked through the unintentional, unofficial guard outside the house. Walking into the house required wading through a sea of bodies, some dancing, others head-nodding, some casually just gazing as they took a swig from a can of beer they brought in with them. Everyone seemed hyper-aware of the space that they occupied, and I would always do what I could to not make any physical contact with anyone when trying to get to an open space. It seemed like everyone else was equally conscious about physical boundaries. But despite the lack of physical person-to-person touch in the room, everyone in the space was linked. People rocked and swayed as a cohesive blob, with occasional hands going in the air to display approval in a variety of ways that seem to be universally practiced. Although some nights were less well attended than others, that whole space, particularly the front room, would fill with people - some from the neighborhood, some from elsewhere in the city or even from other cities (which was the case for me until I moved to Detroit in 2016).

As a regular attendee of the event, I saw some familiar faces every time: local producers in attendance to listen to music created by their friends; bartenders from down the street; regular attendees of various Detroit hip-hop events, and the house DJ, Dayggs, who would play between producer sets to ensure the evening's vibe was correct, elevating and lowering it at the proper moments. I would like to think they recognized me too. Being in that room felt so quintessentially contemporary Detroit to me - a tight-knit, enthusiastic

group of people, hanging out in a reclaimed/repurposed space, listening to beats, feeling good just being together. The Beat Profile seemed to serve as the perfect embodied and sounded display of Andrey Douthard's professed goal to use Paramita Sound as a space for the creation and maintenance of community.

I used to obsess over what defined a "Black sound" or "Black music" other than the skin color of the people making the sounds in question. Now I find myself somewhat indifferent to the answers to those inquiries. Or perhaps cleverly lazy - I'm reminded of Justice Potter Stewart's colloquialism concerning obscenity: "I know it when I see it." In my case, I know it when I hear it. I have become far more concerned with the ways that the perceived Blackness of sounds are mobilized, with what it is that Black sounds can *do*. As a scholar concerned with sound, I am expected to take it as a given that sound does not inherently have identity attributes; people have been trained over the course of their lives to attach certain identity markers to certain sounds. The human need to classify is far more inherent than the race of a sound. As Nina Eidsheim notes in her book *The Race of Sound* (2019), Mendi Obadike's discussion of "acousmatic blackness" can be a useful way to theorize the way that Black voices are heard, perceived, and constructed. Obadike and Eidsheim both use acousmatic Blackness to refer to the presence of Blackness represented only through sound. And as Eidsheim finds in her work on Marian Anderson, we are taught race aurally through the racialization of musical training, and it is the ear of the listener that determines the cultural/social identity of a sound. Jon Cruz (1999), in his monograph on Negro spirituals, white reception, and Black humanity notes that abolitionists attempted to gain sympathy for their movement through the performance of negro spirituals, in the hopes that enslaved Black people would be viewed with more humanity as a result. It was

long assumed that the music created by Black people was merely *noise*, but through various techniques of listening, along with the content they sang in spirituals, white ears began to convert “noise” into music. Sonic Blackness is perhaps a concise, though admittedly limiting, way to categorize the concerns of the aforementioned scholars. I wish to briefly examine the situation at The Beat Profile through the filter of sonic Blackness - how it is produced, how it is listened to, and what it does in the world.

I went to my first Beat Profile back in 2015, when I was in Detroit for what I’d call a fieldwork vacation. Immediately upon moving to Detroit, I became a regular attendee at just about every recurring beat event the city had to offer. I always felt a bit nervous going to Paramita Sound – The Beat Profile in particular seemed like a tightly-knit, almost impenetrable crowd, and the shop was a very small space. Everyone but me seemed to know each other, an experience that I suspect is common among ethnographers. This was a community that had chosen to form, and I did not yet know what I needed to do to get in, or whether getting in was possible for me.

It was common to see someone enter the room and greet dozens of people on their way to their personal vibing/listening space zone. Groups of friends would arrive as well, bringing a built-in comfort zone as they crammed into the sardine tin. I was alone in the crowd, just there to listen to and watch producers play their beats. The more I attended the event, the more I felt a sense of community, even though I rarely knew other people in attendance, and I generally didn’t converse much with people. This is not to say that anyone was ever openly hostile to me. It was quite the contrary. No one told me I was not welcome, and no one ever tried to move me out of whatever space I happened to occupy. But I was still a stranger to them, and, for the most part, that is how I stayed. I was there to

be a part of the crowd, to blend in, to listen to beats, and to get a sense of how that crowd worked. My only connection to them was through that shared sonic space, and an assumed shared love for hip-hop. That was enough.

Having grown up with two Army parents who stressed punctuality to an extreme degree, I have a bad habit of arriving to things far too early, and this happened the first few times I went to The Beat Profile. The event was scheduled to begin at 8pm; I typically arrived around 7:50, and found myself in a nearly empty, fully-illuminated record store, awkwardly sitting in the room, trying to look inconspicuous as I took notes on the fact that I was early and the room was empty. Andrey, the shop owner, would typically exchange familiar pleasantries with me, and offer me a cold can of Pabst Blue Ribbon (I usually declined). Though I have yet to get the opportunity to interview him – not for lack of trying – I got the sense that he thought he knew me. He greeted me with variations on “Hey bruh, you been good?”, “You good, bruh?”, “You good?”, all of which have different meanings in Detroit, depending on situation, location, and tone of voice. There is a familial nature to the way Detroiters greet and interact with each other, stranger or not - many of my research consultants would say that there are no strangers in Detroit, just family and new family.

The show would typically start to pick up around 9:00-ish, and it would be in full swing by ten. In the summer months, the pace of the evening basically correlated with the setting of the sun, but the same parameters were kept throughout Detroit’s seemingly endless winter. There were more people walking in, more greetings, more decibels from the speakers; the thump of kick drums and the rattle of sub bass increased in intensity throughout the night. More and more familiar faces would show as the night progressed - the regulars, friends of the owner, friends of the performers, other artists

from the scene. Most of these seemed to be people who had been a part of The Beat Profile since its inception. There were more head nods and hands up. The room seemed to be filled with a collective mind: everyone knew how and where to move, how to best perform listening in this space. There were always more hugs, and more beers passed around. It was easy to observe that this group musicking is what created and upheld Paramita Sound's ideas about community; these collective performances of hip-hop at The Beat Profile came together to create an experience that participants could feel was representative of themselves, and their city.

In addition to the community built from bodily presence and the physical embodiment of sounds - people grooving, nodding, feeling, and riding beats together - recurring sonic events and group performances at The Beat Profile contributed not only to community, but to a localized perception of insiders vs. outsiders, of hip-hop vs. other, of Detroit vs. Everybody. A call and response of "Whatupdoe"; "When I say De-troit, you say hip-hop." But one recurring moment stood out to me. In between producer sets, the resident DJ, Dayggs, would play music, and this was often the only time you'd hear rapping during The Beat Profile. While Dayggs' sets varied greatly, there was a track that he played once every single Beat Profile: a freestyle performed in 2003 by New York hip-hop group The Diplomats (better known as Dipset) on Black Entertainment Television's long-running program *Rap City*, which was rebranded as *Rap City: Tha Basement* in 1999. It is standard practice in hip-hop for freestyles to be performed over beats from pre-existing, often very well-known rap songs. This was true in the case of the Dipset Freestyle, as the members of the rap group freestyled over the beat from "My Block," a song by Houston rapper Scarface that received a decent amount of buzz and airplay at the

time of its release in 2002. This beat, produced by Nashiem Myrick, features a simple, repeated loop sampled from the very beginning of the song “Be Real Black For Me” by Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway. This loop is slightly sped up from the original and is pitched slightly higher. The most seasoned regulars in the crowd erupted upon hearing those first few notes of the track.



While it may be a bit irresponsible to assume that Myrick specifically chose this sample because of the meaning of the original song, I find it worth mentioning, given the context of this recurring group performance by crowds performing in Black spaces, regardless of their race.



Be real Black for me

With my familiarity with the original song being sampled, I can’t help but hear the original lyric repeating over and over: be real *Black* for me. The original, a love song, a Black power ballad, seemed to funnel all its energy into loving representations of Blackness, and the idea that Black features are beautiful and desirable.

In the context of the Diplomats “My Block” freestyle, which contained no lyrics from the song that it sampled (I heard them in my head, like a phantom), I felt the emphasis change. The Blackness of hip-hop is assumed, so the importance was in the realness: be *real*

*Black* for me. The more the loop repeated in the room, the more I heard a collective project aimed at maintaining, and reifying, the *real Blackness* of Detroit. Within the walls of Paramita Sound during The Beat Profile, everyone, regardless of identity, seemed committed to the creation and maintenance of real Blackness in Detroit, through the performance of hip-hop.

Everyone in the room moved to the track, even if they had never heard it. But those in the crowd who were in the know rapped along with the track, some pantomiming hand motions and arm gestures as if on stage with a microphone. Dayggs would mute the track at strategic, impactful moments, creating a post-recording call and response. This further amplified the effect of crowd participation and community building in the room as voices in the crowd could be heard shouting in unison (“acapella” crowd participation in **bold**):

They can't succumb to the cold, those are frostbitten, up north sitting just like some f'n lost kittens

**They get locked up for carrying boy, they doing time up in Marion, boy, uh!**

Told you, you messing with a gangsta, boy, you messing with some gangstas, boy, **DON'T DO THAT!**

You got coke, don't move that! These blocks belong to us, homie, **REMEMBER I TOLD YOU THAT!**

As for your boys, there's no more messages, if I see you pumping, I'm steppin' in my weapons and

I'm shooting off to the death of him, if he try to run shots ahead of him, he's already done and tell 'em

**WELCOME TO NEW YORK CITY! NO, WELCOME TO DIPSET CITY!**

Public performances of the Dipset Freestyle by Beat Profile attendees allowed participants, regardless of race, to participate in the creation not only of an “in group”, but of a sounded Blackness shared by the community formed in Paramita Sound. The real, ungentrified Detroit was *Black*, and gentrification was the removal of this Blackness. In *Mimesis and Alterity* ([1993] 2018), Michael Taussig asks what might be implied by an



apparent compulsion to become the Other, or if it would be possible to break down barriers through mimicry/performance of the Other. To some extent, I believe that a certain logics of mimesis could apply here, as there exists an obvious performance of Blackness from all participants at the event. But to that end, I also believe that the sense of the Other is far too complex in the case of Detroit hip-hop, where people of all identities participate. One does not need to be Black to participate in the making of Black sound. The Beat Profile and other hip-hop related events that occurred within those walls allowed Paramita Sound, and audience members, to make small, regular investments in sonic Blackness, which were investments in Blackness, which could be considered investments in a real Detroit, *not* a new, gentrified Detroit.

In the pages that follow, I will examine some of the racial, sonic, and spatial history and politics of the West Village neighborhood, where some sounds - particularly Black sounds - are increasingly interpreted by new residents as noise. As I have demonstrated, I am principally interested in the use of sound, and reactions to sound, as a sonic demarcation of gentrifiers vs. the gentrified. Through the use of local news stories and comments from regular Beat Profile attendees and Detroit hip-hop artists, I argue that it is through their investment in an outwardly-sounded Blackness that Paramita Sound can hold the positionality of the gentrified, though they entered the neighborhood as part of a gentrification project, via small business grants and awards. As the policing of noise is a common artifact of gentrification, and Black sounds via hip-hop are often reduced to the category of “noise,” Paramita Sound is able to view noise complaints about hip-hop as gentrification.

## **Harlequin/Columbine’s**

Despite sharing a border with the overwhelmingly white, affluent neighborhood known as Indian Village, West Village, like much of Detroit, was home to businesses that *sounded* Black in the past. One of these businesses was a restaurant and jazz club called Harlequin Cafe/Columbine's. To get more insight into how this space sounded, and how it managed to survive in this location in spite of an already encroaching whiteness, I spoke with the daughter of the former owners of the business. As she informed me, the business, a French restaurant, was originally owned, and given its name, by someone else, but her parents found it fitting to keep this name from the commedia dell'arte tradition, as it portrayed a certain amount of class to the neighborhood (personal communication via email 12/4/2018). Her father put countless hours into studying commedia dell'arte in an effort to "steep this new phase of this French, [West Village] restaurant in an artistic lore that could hold a Black/Filipina owner, and the noise of a jazz club that smoked ribs on the front sidewalk on weekends." Her father knew, even in the earliest stages of the business, that they would need a way to negotiate tensions that would arise over the Blackness of their space in such close proximity to the ironically-named Indian Village. She noted that the negotiation involved a heavy amount of code-switching between European fine-dining and jazz and blues, but that this seemed to be the formula that allowed the space to exist where it did:

And for it all to work, it had to be rooted in the idea of artistic excellence. In the beginning, people raved that the French food was sublime. My mom, who ran the restaurant while my father served a short sentence, was one of the most amazing cooks. She inherited many of the Harlequin's recipes. And she had a small staff of chefs. But, being a woman in business, people tested her. And she'd get in the kitchen and cook herself. And when she did, the restaurant took off. When my father got home, he took over cooking. They've both always lived their

lives deeply immersed in art. So, it poured through into the food, the decor, the music. They'd create 8 course winemaker dinners honoring various regions of the world. In my observations, this combination of my parents re-defining and modeling what an immersive and artistic life looked like was an effective and subversive way of opening the door an almost bougie bohemian acceptance of more world culture. And it literally took that type of campaign to recode Blues, African Art and Jazz to being of the same artistic rigor as béchamel. (personal communication via email 12/4/2018)

Though artistic excellence obviously exists within all forms of art, it seems apparent that the owners of Harlequin knew they had to give off an air of European artistic excellence to “make it” so close to the border of Indian Village. They were artistically-inclined people, yet it was still a pragmatic, strategic choice to endorse fully the angle of *commedia dell'arte* and French food - a transnational, European angle. But as she notes, the success of the jazz club, and the acceptance of blues, jazz, and African aesthetics, hinged on the general (white) public accepting the space as one of high art, and high culture. In a sense, the Blackness/brownness of the space had to be hidden in the Trojan horse of “exquisite” French food and generally European sensibilities - things that read, taste, and sound outwardly as white, like béchamel.

In the restaurant, there was no written menu. Her father “presented the entire menu as a monologue...it was theater.” And, “if someone asked him how much a dish was, he’d tell them, ‘if you have to ask, you’re in the wrong place.’” But through this performance of status, he would weave in menu items, with Shakespearean references, alongside stories of Black musical masters, placing all on an equal plane. In her words, “He’d get someone to taste a sublime Steak Diane and equate that with the ethereal plane that Coltrane evoked, and the noise complaints stopped. But, no one should have to undertake this sort of campaign.”

As the years rolled on, the restaurant was situated on a block that was the dividing line between wealthy Indian Village and the low-income outskirts. (Which at that point didn't seem to go by an official name. Often, I just heard it called "the neighborhood".) The outskirts seemed to be understandably seething, especially at holiday time. My parents were very interested in hiring locally, from the neighborhood. And many Indian Village residents were regulars, so in the beginning (and especially under my mom's guidance) the restaurant was a gathering spot, and therefore protected (from crime and from noise complaints). (ibid)

This block, Agnes Street, between Van Dyke and Parker, is now home to a number of well-attended businesses: Craft Work, Red Hook Coffee, Detroit Vegan Soul. Once a border between the more expensive neighborhood of Indian Village and low-income people, the block has become a conduit. According to my interlocutor, there was resentment felt in “the neighborhood,” around the very nearby displays of wealth. Yet Harlequin/Columbine’s was still able to exist in this liminal space by serving as a community space of sorts. They employed people from the neighborhood while still being patronized by wealthy residents of neighboring Indian Village. As everyone felt invested in the space for various reasons, there was no need for anyone to call in a noise complaint. But her father’s noisy nature caused this to flip.

Over time, this changed. My father fired some people in his over the top and overbearing way. He alienated some customers, terrible reviews rolled in. And then the war zone began. My father was attacked with baseball bats in the alley while valet parking a car. Someone threw a garbage can through the front window during dinner.

This was back before the other businesses had moved to the block, and as she notes, the restaurant was vulnerable not only because of its isolation, but because of its “position between these two worlds.” Outside of any acoustic noise the space may have emitted,

the restaurant's liminal state was, in and of itself, noisy.

The restaurant seemed to keep surviving because the cops liked the food and music. But, ultimately...it became harder and harder to keep up the entire cycle of work and code-switching and artistic rigor necessary to keep everyone invested in the place enough to protect it from all the noise complaints, robberies, and financial shut down.

The trust of both neighborhoods was lost, and an increasing number of noise complaints were called in from Indian Village residents, all while crime plagued the business.

Harlequin Cafe shut its doors for good in 2004, and the block sat vacant for over a decade, until the businesses currently sitting there moved in, from 2013 to 2015. Paramita Sound moved to the neighborhood during this same span.

A common story of gentrification is that artists move to an area because of its affordability and because they seem to have freedom/free reign to make a neighborhood look and sound the way that they want (Moskowitz 2017). If the city has disinvested from a neighborhood, there is typically a very low or non-existent police presence, and a lack of emergency services; while this may spell danger in terms of safety, crime, and neoliberal capitalist fantasies of order, it allows people to move and act how they want, and it allows people to be creatively resourceful. This includes artists. In Detroit, there has been a long- standing community of artists working mostly “underground” - underground as far as law enforcement is concerned, though their work is not done in any kind of hidden fashion. Walls get covered with street art, abandoned buildings serve as music venues. Detroit artists use the spaces that are around them. The community is self-policing and self-governing, and there are typically few problems. But if news of these idyllic artist spaces spreads too far, they become too appealing to too many artists from far and wide. The *New York Times* inadvertently covered this phenomenon in an

article titled “Last Stop on the L Train: Detroit” on July 10, 2015.

It is now well-documented that some of Brooklyn’s much-written-about creative class is being driven out of the borough by high prices and low housing stock. Some are going to Los Angeles (or even Queens), but others are migrating to the Midwest, where Detroit’s empty industrial spaces, community-based projects, experimental art scene and innovative design opportunities beckon, despite the city’s continuing challenges. “Brooklyn lost its whole sense of adventure for me,” said Ben Wolf, 31, a Pratt Institute graduate who, after more than a decade in New York, moved to Detroit almost three years ago to continue creating his site-specific installations and sculptures, made from rotten boards, rusty stairwells and peeling paint, or as he said, “the decadence of abandonment.” “Initially I was attracted to the freedom of space and materials I found here,” said Mr. Wolf. “But what has surprised me is how Detroit has allowed me to mature.” Mr. Wolf now works in a 25,000-square-foot warehouse and lives with his girlfriend in another 2,000-square-foot space — both of which he bought for a combined cost of under \$8,000 two years ago. “Owning my own place or starting a business was financially impossible in Brooklyn,” he said. “I came here thinking I might help save Detroit, and instead it has saved me,” he added.

Detroit equals adventure to artists coming from outside of the city. But obvious in much of their rhetoric is a sense of entitlement, a right to come into the city and take what they want, to revel in the “decadence of abandonment.” Cities and private companies begin to take notice when artists seem to flock to an area like Eastern Market, North End, or West Village. They create initiatives to incentivize artists and small businesses to move to the area. Once that work is done, the area starts to have “value” to the types of residents the city hopes to attract. Even the most well-meaning artist, one who claims a commitment to cultural preservation and community building, can get swept up in this gentrification process. All some people can hope to do is stay one step ahead of the crawl of gentrification. Perhaps that was the goal for Andrey Douthard and Paramita Sound. But it

seems like the bigger goal was to exist in the neighborhood without changing it, and to invest in Detroit's Blackness, as that seems to be a compelling antidote to gentrification.

The repeated performance of sounded Blackness via the Dipset Freestyle and other collective performances at The Beat Profile are clear examples of the building and maintenance of community through sound. If community is built in this space, and there seems to be an effort to maintain the Blackness of the space, and the city, through this event, it seems clear that Paramita Sound was attempting to preserve the area rather than participate in the gentrification that may have followed specifically because businesses like Paramita Sound existed in the neighborhood. I posit that Paramita's success, and the way that they are able to view themselves as outside of, even distant from, the looming specter of gentrification in Detroit, is through their successful investment in Blackness via Detroit hip-hop. The owner and employees have a very obvious, palpable love of both hip-hop and local music. There are a number of businesses throughout Detroit that are viewed as gentrifiers, for various reasons - they don't seem to do anything to serve the surrounding (Black) community, they don't employ or provide space for Black citizens, etc. This is similar to the gentrification of Harlem described by Monique Taylor (2002). As Douthard stated in an interview for CBS Detroit, "We wanted to bring something to this neighborhood, and to really be a part of this community...not take anything away from it, but really just add to the value that we think it already has." He acknowledges that he is joining a community that already has value, and he wishes to contribute – Japonica Brown-Saracino has referred to this stance as "social preservationist" (Brown-Saracino 2009). Paramita Sound, in serving as a meeting place for practitioners and fans of hip-hop (which is always-already read as Black music no matter the race of the participant), as an amplifier for sonic Blackness, and as a

stage for Black performance, positioned itself firmly in the corner of Black Detroit. It was as if Paramita Sound had existed in Detroit all along, subjected to the same white flight and municipal neglect that the Black community (and blue collar white community, to a certain extent) had survived.

In looking at the grand arc of gentrification in Detroit during this post-bankruptcy period of “renaissance,” it becomes clear that gentrification has as much to do with race as it does with disinvestment, perceived abandonment, and the like. Gentrification demands peace and quiet, order. Paramita sounded its Blackness out into the street. With the West Village’s increased gentrification and policing, the shop’s choices were untenable: it is risky to traffic in Black sound, more so to do it loudly. Black sound becomes noise, and noises must be silenced. Facing mounting pressure and unable to host *The Beat Profile* out of fear of noise complaints, the shop shut its doors and relocated to a storefront downtown, an area that has already seen a massive gentrification wave. Though other shows have been created in its place, *The Beat Profile* is no more. Gentrification, which lead to complaints and the hyperpolicing of Black sound, effectively killed the noise.



### 3. I Should Be Dead

In late capitalism, the dead are highly productive.  
-Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane” (2010: 14)

In this chapter, I frustrate common notions of death and dying to argue that within hip-hop, and specifically Detroit hip-hop - which is coded as Black due to both Detroit and hip-hop’s associations with Blackness - *deadness* is the state from which music is created. Building upon Abdul JanMohamed’s notion of the “death-bound-subject” (2005: 2), wherein (Black) individuals are subjected to a constant threat of imminent death, thereby forming their subjectivities through a relationship bound to death, I argue that Blackness is not only inextricably linked to deadness, but is born out of it - this deadness is a primary basis for identity formation. It requires a reframing of perceptions of death as simply the ending point of life: rather than taking the point-of-view that death is a sad, biological inevitability and ending, participants within Detroit hip-hop incorporate deadness as a necessary aesthetic for creation. A transcendent space of what I will term *radical Black presence* is created through deadness, which is part of the collective consciousness of Blackness, Detroit, and hip-hop, and is a category imposed on all three through a number of means including outside mediation, representation, misrepresentation, and white supremacy. Various combinations of these categories create generative spaces and spatial entitlements<sup>30</sup> for the questioning of what it means to die, what it means to die while Black, and how the very notion of Black identity can be formed through the deadness of Detroit hip-hop. As this Blackness through

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<sup>30</sup> As theorized by Gaye Theresa Johnson, spatial entitlements are a “means for understanding how working-class communities and individuals secure or create social membership, even when the neighborhoods and meaningful spaces of congregation around them are destroyed (2013, xi).”

deadness exists in a space separate from the white supremacist capitalist system that renders it illegible, it exists in interesting dissonance to the Stanyek and Piekut quote used to open this chapter, “in late capitalism, the dead are highly productive” (2010: 14). In deadness, as I use it, the drive for capitalist production is irrelevant, and works produced, lacking corporeality in the racist capitalist sense, can’t be truly consumed *outside* of deadness.

Whereas Stanyek and Piekut’s formulation of deadness is very useful, they use deadness to refer to a system of posthumous artistic contribution, “intermundane” collaboration between the living and dead, and the extraction of dead labor to benefit of the living. Deadness, in my formulation, does not allow for labor extraction - the “dead” are agential, produce because of their own artistic desire to do so, and use the space of deadness to realize creative freedom outside of dominant formulations of space, time, and living.

To begin, I explore Abdul JanMohamed’s theorizations of the death-bound-subject in concert with the work of other scholars including Orlando Patterson and Karla F.C. Holloway to examine the conditions and possibilities of death in Black life and non/being, illuminating the formation of deadness as a productive site of Black subjectivities. I follow with an exegesis of hip-hop’s long association with death and dying, presenting a reorientation of the oft-repeated notion that “hip-hop is dead,” conventionally meaning that the musical style has become soulless and stale. Here I argue that hip-hop *is* dead, in another sense, showing that the music is symbolically bound to death. Its status as a Black cultural form means that it is always already dead within a white supremacist framework that requires Black death and non/humanity as necessary for the functioning of state, democracy, and

life.<sup>31</sup> I then present my primary case study, which traces various encounters with deadness as radical Black presence through a track by Detroit rapper ZelooperZ titled “ISBD,” an acronym for “I Should Be Dead.” Throughout the song, ZelooperZ repeats the phrase “I should be dead,” and this repetition calls into question the power of death-bound-subjectivity, what it means to assert the necessity of one’s fate, and what subject position can be occupied through deadness. Using ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldwork data, music analysis, and video analysis, I consider the implications of recognizing a Blackness that is fully realized through deadness and the Black possibilities that arise through the rupture that is “dead” creation.

## **Death-Bound**

Abdul JanMohamed defines the death-bound-subject as a “subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death,” noting that the “death-bound-subject is a deeply aporetic structure to the extent that [they are] ‘bound,’ and hence produced as a subject, by the process of ‘unbinding’” (2005: 2).’ Though JanMohamed generally uses it as adjective, ‘bound’ can be considered in its adjective forms (fastened to, obligated, ready), its verb form (to leap toward), and its noun form (a limiter, something that restrains). As JanMohamed explicates, the enslaved, and Black people living under Jim Crow laws, lived under social conditions and structures that used the theoretical and actual immediate threat of death as coercion; lynchings, for instance, though technically extralegal, were used in Jim Crow society as a method of controlling the behavior of Black people. Through this formulation, one can see that Black people carried death with them (they were

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<sup>31</sup> See Vargas and James 2012, wherein they argue that Black death is a constitutive aspect of state/nationhood in the US.

fastened to it), that it shaped their decisions (they were obligated to act in a certain manner to avoid it being imposed) and created clear confines for their behavior, and that the combination of these factors led to a condition in which there was a constant fear and feeling of moving towards death. He also notes that there is a self-evident “tradition within African American literature and culture that continually and systematically meditates on the effectivity of the threat of death as a mode of coercion” (2005: 3), showing that there have been strategies developed and passed down to push against, circumvent, subvert, defang this threat – ways to appropriate life through the threat of death. As I demonstrate in this chapter, one such strategy is to use the looming presence of death as lyrical inspiration, but another is to consider death as power and presence that can be embodied by those bound to it for productive means.

Orlando Patterson (1982) theorizes *social death* as a condition of powerlessness and dishonor that creates a subject position with no sociopolitical presence within dominant society; in other words, socially-dead subjects do not register as having subjectivity or citizenship under white supremacy. The socially-dead being only carries value inasmuch as they are willing to subject themselves to the master in exchange for a partially-extended life, one that could be revoked at any moment without the master facing legal or social repercussions. As JanMohamed notes, it is this precarity that contributes to the formation of the death-bound-subject (2005: 16). He writes:

Within the politico-phenomenological theoretical horizon, we need to begin by noting that the subject-position within the structure of social-death that the slave is obliged to occupy is a totally and explosively contradictory one; it is an impossible, aporetic position. Heuristically, this aporetic structure is divisible into two aspects that act synergistically with each other... The first aspect is the product of the slave's obligation

to live under a conditionally commuted death sentence. On the one hand, the imminent, unpredictable possibility of death makes the slave live in such a way that his being is consumed with the preoccupation of avoiding the possibility of death. On the other hand, the same structure requires him to control his desire to live as fully as he would like since stepping out of the bounds of his social-death could easily result in his death. He is thus obliged to control and repress his own desire for a full life. *The death-bound-subject's 'life' is thus defined by the need to avoid the possibilities of life as well as the possibility of death* (2005: 19, emphasis in original)

The second aspect is the condition of simultaneously being subject and commodity, wherein the enslaved are the object of property but cannot be the subject of property, and therefore cannot even own themselves (2005:21). JanMohamed proposes a “dialectic of death” constituted by the relations between social death, actual death – by which he means biological death wherein the subject is aware of their dying, and has chosen to ‘actualize’ their death – and symbolic death, which he posits is “constituted by the death of the slave’s subject-position as a socially dead being and his rebirth in a different subject-position” (2005: 17). Reading with this dialectic, the threat of actual death is a condition of social death, but a subject choosing to actualize their death takes the power out of the hands of their oppressor, thus negating the power of social death and placing value in actual death. The enactment of this actual death can result in symbolic death, which is a subversion of an imposed subject position into a reborn, chosen subject position.

As Karla Holloway notes, “African Americans’ particular vulnerability to an untimely death in the United States intimately affects how black culture both represents itself and is represented” (2002: 2). This vulnerability, along with the prescient knowledge that death is, has always been, and will continue to be more immediate parts of Black life than the

lives of others, turns spaces of deadness into spaces of radical Black presence. Holloway writes:

Instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of our daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience into the culture's iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility. For black parents and their youngsters, elders and their adult children, the formative years, the waning years, and each day between were haunted by one spiritual's refrain: "soon one morning, death will come a-calling." In this macabre revision of *cpt* (colored people's time), death was an untimely accompaniment to the life of black folk—a sensibility that was, unfortunately, based on hard facts. Several measures of mortality (childhood morbidity, maternal death in childbearing, cardiac-related deaths of elders, suicide, death at the hands of police, and other violent deaths of youth) documented rates that were statistically significant and comparatively higher for African Americans than for other racial or ethnic groups in the United States, even when differences in economic class and sex were taken into account. Black folk thus found a cultural code about mortality to be both usable and familiar. (6)

Rebecca Louise Carter's work on Black humanity in the city of New Orleans expresses similar views on the usability of mortality within Black culture. Speaking specifically about the city as a crescent, she writes that "[her conceptualization of the city] claims the space of death, characteristic of many poor Black neighborhoods, as a simultaneously generative space for the envisioning and crafting of a sustainable Black urban future" (2019: 46). My claim is that deadness as radical Black presence *is* this generative space to which Carter refers, or the Black cultural sensibility to which Holloway refers. ZelooperZ enters this space sonically, through a track that could just as soon be heard as a testimony, a telling of God's intervention and deliverance from evil within the Black church tradition. In laying claim to death as a should-be state of being, ZelooperZ both reiterates the regularity (and expectation)

of untimely, unwarranted death for Black people, and the strength that comes from occupying a space of radical Black presence and generating, envisioning, and crafting new Black futures.

## **Hip-Hop Is Dead**

In 2006, Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, better known by his hip-hop moniker Nas, announced himself as a coroner and released an album titled *Hip-Hop Is Dead*. Nas was certainly not the first artist to hold this sentiment, but in making this proclamation, he joined a well-rehearsed, quotidian discourse on genre deterioration and death.<sup>32</sup> The album's title track samples the Incredible Bongo Band's cover of Iron Butterfly's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida," a song considered to be a direct precursor (if not an early example) to the sonic harbinger of doom that would come to be known as Heavy Metal.<sup>33</sup> The opening of the track features a voice filtered to sound as if it is coming through a megaphone repeating the phrase "hip-hop, hip-hop, is dead." Further eulogies arise throughout the song, with the Black Eyed Peas' will.i.am singing "hip-hop just died this morning, she's dead."<sup>35</sup> In the song's hook, Nas raps:

If hip hop should die before I wake  
I'll put an extended clip and body 'em all day  
Roll to every station, wreck the DJ (x2)

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<sup>32</sup> I.e. pop culture statements on punk rock dying in the late 70s (or the cynical rebuttal "punk's not dead, it just sucks now"), "dead as disco," etc.

<sup>33</sup> The sampling of a cover of a pre-recorded song presents an interesting dead trail, following the observations of Jonathan Sterne and others that sound recordings have always been associated with death.

<sup>35</sup> Hip-Hop, when anthropomorphized, has been gendered as female by a swath of artists from Common to Kanye West. Due to the hypermasculinity prevalent within the music, and performative Black masculinity, it seems that it is generally only possible to feel feelings of love, loss, and lament towards the feminine. There are of course exceptions to this.

Riffing on the centuries-old Christian children's bedtime prayer "Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep," Nas indicates that he is prepared to find hip-hop's killers, and to exact his revenge.

The song's second verse is perhaps the most telling, as Nas states:

What influenced my raps? Stick-ups and killings  
Kidnappings, project buildings, drug dealings  
Criticize that, why's that?  
'Cause Nas rap is compared to legitimized crap  
'Cause we love to talk on nasty chickens  
Most intellectuals will only half listen  
So you can't blame jazz musicians  
Or David Stern with his NBA fashion issues  
Oh, I think they like me, in my white tee  
You can't ice me, we here for life, B  
On my second marriage, hip hop's my first wifey  
And for that, we not taking it lightly  
If hip hop should die, we die together  
Bodies in the morgue lie together, all together now

Nas draws a line in the sand by stating what *didn't* kill hip-hop (jazz musicians, the commissioner of the NBA), then directly referencing two songs by Atlanta hip-hop outfit Dem Franchize Boyz, "I Think They Like Me" and "(In My) White Tee." Nas is merely echoing a sentiment that was shared by many rappers, and fans of "real" hip-hop:<sup>36</sup> new rappers, particularly rappers from the South, or other rappers who fancied themselves as being from the "trap,"<sup>37</sup> were responsible for the genre's demise, as they were only in the music for the money, and not for the "love." As Nas was one of rap's elder statesmen at the time of this album's release, due to the high speed at which new artists and styles enter the hip-hop universe, his words were given a lot of weight, giving many hip-hop fans new, or at least reformulated, frameworks and language for asserting the ever-important "realness" or

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<sup>36</sup> Perceived "lyricism" has long been a rubric used by some fans of hip-hop to determine what is real hip-hop and what is not.

<sup>37</sup> Common hip-hop parlance for neighborhoods and life situations deemed inescapable due to economic inequalities, violence, lack of employment, etc. The trap lends itself to the establishment of alternative economies as means of survival. "Trapping" has become the terminology for a number of alternative employment activities, from selling drugs to sex work.



authenticity of hip-hop. If we return to his lyrics from “Hip-Hop Is Dead,” Nas seems to inadvertently reveal a large parallelism in the discourse of hip-hop’s death: “what influenced my raps? Stick-ups and killings.” Hip-hop appears to be dead because it no longer sources death as inspiration, at least not to Nas’ liking. Of course, hip-hop absolutely still uses death as one of its primary sources for inspiration, whether that is rapping about dying or killing, slang that references death/killing as positive traits, or even references to death in one’s hip-hop moniker - i.e. Killer Mike, Murda Beatz, DOOM, etc. The topic of death is so prevalent in the music that they are inextricably joined to each other, they feed back into one another, they are forever associated in the public imaginary.

## **Hip-Hop *Is* Dead**

Murders all the time is all I see  
Detroit 187 on you niggas TV  
-Danny Brown, “Detroit 187<sup>38</sup>” (2011)

Hip-hop has maintained a complicated, symbiotic relationship with death through the course of its existence. Common origin stories of hip-hop speak of Black and brown youth creating the music in the Bronx as a way to escape from the harsh realities of urban death, drugs, gang life, incarceration (social death), and corporeal death. As Black city life continued to get more difficult and violent as a result of state-sponsored sabotage,<sup>39</sup> racist policing, lack of funding to civic and social services in Black communities, it can be argued that the music

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<sup>38</sup> Detroit 187 was the name of an ABC crime drama that aired for one season, from 2010 to 2011. “187” is the common police code for homicide.

<sup>39</sup> Though still treated as allegations, it has become common knowledge within the Black community that apparatuses of the US government, particularly the FBI and the CIA, have been involved or directly responsible for a number of devastating blows to Black Americans. These include the FBI’s efforts to undermine the momentum of the Black Panther Party, and their involvement in the assassinations of important figures like Malcolm X and Fred Hampton via “counterintelligence” gathered through their COINTELPRO operations (Bloom and Martin 2013), and the CIA’s involvement in trafficking drugs to be sold in Black communities, then using the profits from drug sales to fund guerilla armies in Latin America (Webb 1996, 1998).

began more and more to reflect these realities (see Spencer et al 1991; Wheeler 1991; Zook 1992; Baker 1993; Kitwana 1994; Rose 1994; Keyes 1996; George 1998; Crossley 2005). The mid to late 1980s saw the rise of “gangster rap,” with performers like Schoolly D, N.W.A., and Ice T performing songs that were explicitly about violence, “hustling” in its myriad forms, and the harsh realities of Black life in the US - Black life that often ended in violent, premature death. Gangster rap became the most commercially-successful genre of the music, giving birth to genre conventions for lyrical content and thematic material that are followed across the entire range of hip-hop in the present day. Now, the most widely-circulated critiques of hip-hop from its detractors, regardless of their race, are that the music is “only about money, women, cars, and guns,” “promotes violence and crime,” and harms youth. Many of these critiques are lobbed at the whole of “pop” music, particularly critiques of the music as hypersexual - music producer Mike Stock commented in 2010 that the current music and music videos were like “soft pornography.” What seems to set rap apart from other types of popular musics in these critiques is a racialized focus on the music’s relationship with violence, and particularly with death.

As any fan of opera, reggae, country, blues, etc. could attest, themes of death and/or violence are not exclusive to rap music. While they seem like more frequent themes in hip-hop, much of that can be attributed to genre convention and mainstream/radio/major label demand. There are more examples of these themes in the hip-hop to which the general public is typically exposed. Death metal is perhaps the only other music that receives the same amount of scrutiny for its violent themes, and a number of metal bands have been blamed for inspiring various deadly acts, including the Columbine tragedy, the murder of Elyse Pahler, and the 1985 death by suicide of John McCollum, whose parents attempted to sue Ozzy

Osbourne, claiming that his song “Suicide Solution,” which McCollum had apparently listened to shortly before his death, contained the subliminal lyric “get the gun.” Yet in these examples with metal, critics, detractors, and litigators have often invoked religious themes to place blame on the music. The music is decried as “Satanic,” thus providing a convenient foil for the behaviors of the usually white listeners to the music who turn aggressor, and the almost always white performers on stage. It is the influence of Satan, an avatar of evil placed upon these white performers and aggressors, that leads them astray; the implication is that they begin pure, and have been tainted. They can return to their pure, holy original state. Rap, rappers, and rap fans are not afforded this luxury, because of constructed racial rhetorics around the music (Binder 1993). Hip-hop and Blackness are considered a grand pathology, often with violence and death merely being symptomatic of this disease.

Numerous academics have studied hip-hop in relation to death, some to say that hip-hop is a violent, deadly, negative influence (Best 1990; Krohn and Suazo 1995; Tatum 1999; Tanner 2001; Sacco and Kennedy 2002; Alexander 2003), or to study and critique it as a reflection of the presumed “deadly” culture from which it emerges (see Rose 1994; Richardson and Scott 2002; Ramsey 2003; Kubrin 2005; Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley 2009; Hite 2017), or to highlight the rhetoric of death that pervades the music to various ends (Armstrong 1993; Quinn 1996; Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009; Herd 2009; Mubirumusoke 2016). Additionally, the deaths of many rappers have become public spectacle, from the murders of 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G. to the murder of Nipsey Hussle. A 2015 study performed by a professor at the University of Sydney concluded that murder was the cause of death for 51.5% of rappers.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, there is the speculation - dare I say *expectation* -

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<sup>40</sup> “Music to die for: how genre affects popular musicians’ life expectancy” was written and posted by Dianna Theadora Kenny on a website called The Conversation.

that a number of rappers have committed homicide, and there are, in fact, rappers serving prison sentences for homicide. This massive discursive space, regardless of the aims of individual studies or commentaries, presents Blackness, hip-hop, and death as always already in relation to one another, to point of being forced into a joint existence.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of blame, and devoid of any intentional judgment, one can observe that genre conventions perpetuate numerous mentions of death in rap lyrics, to the point that making an exhaustive list would be a Sisyphean task. I am interested in showing the multitude of linkages that already exist and have saturated the public and scholarly imaginary over time. It is through constant associations of Blackness with hip-hop (Quinn 1996; Morgan and Bennett 2011; Bradley 2017, etc.), hip-hop's association with death (as enumerated above), and death's association with Blackness both in the US and globally (Fanon 1952; Fanon 1961; Hartman 1997; Holloway 2002; Sexton 2015; Sharpe 2016; Ziyad 2017; Winters 2018) that I view rap as *dead music*. Hip-hop *is* dead. To complicate this even further, a slogan has arisen in popularity among many of my research contacts, and it can be worn proudly on a t-shirt created by a clothing company called Kre8 UNLTD: "Hip-Hop Ain't Dead, It Just Moved To Detroit." As discussed in my first chapter, Detroit carries an association with deadness - and blackness - that hip-hop also carries. The nexus of these categories - Blackness, death, hip-hop, and Detroit - is where I will now turn my attention, as I examine ideas of identity formed through "ISBD."

## **ISBD**

It seemed like a typical evening at the monthly hip-hop night The Beat Profile, and for all intents and purposes, it was. The usual scene unfolded as I parked my car down Agnes Street

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<sup>41</sup> I realize that by participating in this discourse and demonstrating these links, I, too, am making this move...

and began my short, attentive walk to Paramita Sound. Seemingly quiet streets gradually opened into corridors of sub bass and kick drum. Darkness lightly, sparingly peppered by amber that eventually became polluted with streetlights upon approaching the corner of Agnes and Van Dyke. A few cigarette smokers standing outside the bar/restaurant Craft Work, one of the only other things open in the Indian Village/West Village neighborhood at this hour. A cool breeze rolling in from the Detroit River, only a few blocks south. I turned the corner, and the house was there waiting - 1417 Van Dyke. More smokers standing outside here than Craft Work, less than 100 yards away. The smell of tobacco began to morph and mingle with the faintest hint of marijuana - still faint this early in the evening. Recreational marijuana is still not legal in Michigan at the time of this writing, and even in places where it is, public consumption is rarely allowed. But this was Detroit, and to echo a sentiment shared by so many of my interlocutors, the handful of cops in the city have much, much bigger things to worry about.<sup>42</sup> The opening and broadening of the sound had been so gradual during the walk that it was hardly noticeable. Hardly noticeable until I approached, greeted the smokers with a “whatupdoe?” and a head nod, walked up the steps, and opened the front door.

BOOM. The sheer force of the sub bass and kick drum are enough to almost knock me back out onto the street. How was this house holding in all of those vibrations without collapsing into rubble? Is that what happened to the carcasses of houses that remained up the block?

I tended to stand in the same area every time, with varying degrees of success depending on the size of the crowd. In the back-ish, right-ish part of the room, I felt like I

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<sup>42</sup> This was an observation made before the fateful night that led to nine police officers arriving on the scene to respond to a noise complaint - an absolutely disproportionate response to the “threat.”

could see everyone - their joy in seeing friends, their ecstasy in being lost in the music, the passing of beer bottles and vaporizer pens. A billed producer was finishing their set, so Dayggs, the house DJ, was waiting in the wings, ready to take over and play some music in the interim, before the next producer took the booth. The night was still young, and the room was full, but not packed like it would be later, so Dayggs resisted playing the unofficial anthem of The Beat Profile, “Dipset Freestyle” (discussed in Chapter Two). That particular night, he was playing a lot of MF DOOM, an artist well known in underground hip-hop circles, a “rapper’s rapper,” someone who has garnered a lot of respect for his unorthodox approach to both rhyming and beatmaking but has never received mainstream radio play. Sensing the crowd had started moving less and listening more, the DJ switched gears, playing a remix of “After Party,” the R&B dance track by Koffee Brown from the early 2000s. The remix had a definite Detroit techno veneer - four-on-the-floor beat, uptempo, grimy/crunchy distortion to the kick drum. It was a ghettotech afterparty. The room came alive as people danced together, but alone.<sup>43</sup>

After working the crowd into a light fervor, Dayggs transitioned into something I didn’t recognize, that, at the time, it seemed like everyone else did. The swirling sounds began softly, increasing in volume and intensity, passing through a muffled filter and into piercing clarity, seeming to get closer and closer to my face with every pulse. As the sounds felt like they had reached an uncomfortable zenith, the room was suddenly broken open. A sub bass so loud that it penetrated me, leaving me feeling as if I’d been kicked in the stomach. My toes began to shake. Arriving back in the room after my sudden displacement

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<sup>43</sup> This is typical in the Detroit techno scene. People respect personal space as much as physical space allows, and the scene, beyond my observations and according to research contacts who identify as women, is known for creating spaces where people can dance without feeling unwanted physical contact.

and disorientation, I noticed people head banging, fist pumping, jumping up and down, their host bodies being completely taken over by these extraterrestrial sounds. My conscious hearing returned as I looked at people's faces and noticed them chanting "*I should be dead!*" for what seemed like an eternity to me at the time. Is this crowd chanting they should be dead? Dayggs walked around from the DJ booth to check the levels of the speakers - as if there was some universe in which the track was not loud enough. I approached him, tapped him on the shoulder, and questioned him with all of the gall that a slightly-tipsy person can.

Yo, what in the *fuck* is this?"

"Bruh, this is ZelooperZ. You ain't heard this before?"

I had not.

The room continued to buzz around me as people performed along with the song in various ways, some vocalizing along, some just dancing, some grimacing<sup>44</sup> knowingly to the sound of the sub bass and kick drums. The hook generated the most participation, and by the end of the song, I had joined in.

"I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead! I should be dead!"

The immediate unfolding of the scene certainly caused me to call into question what I was saying, and what the whole room was saying. As I learned, there is a particular identity formation and reification that occurs through ZelooperZ's use of the phrase, but the meanings and identities can quickly shift, depending on the subject position of the speaker and the listener. But this encounter, and other encounters I had/have with the track, raise questions as to what ZelooperZ is *saying* on the track. What does it mean to voice and reinscribe notions

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<sup>44</sup> Colloquially known as "stank face."

of space and place in the “living” world, and how do those meanings shift as the spaces/settings shift?

## **We Should Be Dead**

As discussed more thoroughly in my second chapter, The Beat Profile was a monthly music night that occurred at a record shop called Paramita Sound. Paramita Sound was located in an old house in a part of Detroit known as West Village - a somewhat rapidly gentrifying part of the city, more in terms of businesses than homes. The event came to an untimely close and the business was forced to shut down and eventually move locations, after a series of noise complaints that culminated in an overly-drastic and dramatic police response. Though the attendance at The Beat Profile was generally quite racially-mixed, it was a celebration of Black sounds and sonic practices; these Black sounds were silenced, killed through gentrification and disproportionate policing. I want to consider the implications of playing, listening to, and performing with a song like “ISBD” in the context of this space, which is now dead, and in the larger context of Detroit, which has been burdened with the constant news of its untimely death since soldiers (particularly Black soldiers) returned home after World War II (Sugrue 1996).

In the documentary film *We Are Not Ghosts* (2012), Detroit poet, activist, and artist Jessica Care Moore proclaims, “Somebody’s gotta tell them, that we are not ghosts, that we are in this city and we are alive!” This sentiment is enumerated countless times in various ways by a slew of Detroit poets, rappers, visual artists, and every day folks. Detroit rapper Mic Write, in his song “H.O.M.E.S.” (2015) declares that Detroit and Detroiters are “coughing from the coffin, we still alive!” It is clear that Detroiters have something to say about their unnecessary obituaries and the fact that while “the world” at large has given up on



them, they don't need the world to grant them the life that they've always possessed and continue to create.<sup>45</sup> So it would appear that to declare "I should be dead" ad nauseum is dissonant with the standard local sentiment, particularly from within the hip-hop scene. The group performance of "ISBD" can be thought of in two concurrent, dissonant ways. It is an act of group defiance, and thus a tool for creating camaraderie and group identification, for a room full of Detroiters (especially Detroiters participating in the hip-hop scene) to chant "I should be dead." Perhaps even more so than shown in my prior discussion of insider identification and identity formation via group performance of "Dipset Anthem," Detroiters chanting "I should be dead" seems to be a knowing, tongue-in-cheek phrase: a sounded elbow nudge and a wink. The implied phrase is "I should be dead, according to you...and yet, here I am. You don't know shit!" At the same time, it is a morbid prognostication, perhaps ushering in the noise complaints that began to escalate, thus causing the death of the event, and the death of that business' iteration in its West Village location. Perhaps "I should be dead" was met with a "let's take care of that" by the Detroit Police Department.

Black death, and discussions of death and dying among Black people, are quotidian, mundane. The speed with which stories of unarmed Black people, typically men, enter and exit the US national news is but one indicator of this, and the should-be-commonsensual charge "Black Lives Matter" arose in direct response to the regularity of Black deaths. Narratives of Black death and dying are also ubiquitous on television screens and in theaters. As Guthrie Ramsey discusses in his 2003 monograph *Race Music*, the industry-driven somewhat co-constitutive relationship between hip-hop and "urban" films à la John

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<sup>45</sup> Tommy Walker's now-iconic clothing brand Detroit Vs. Everybody is a shining example of this, and his brand name was borrowed to title a 2014 track by Eminem that featured some of Detroit's most well-known hip-hop artists: Dej Loaf, Trick Trick, Danny Brown, Royce da 5'9", and Big Sean.

Singleton's *Boyz n The Hood* (1991) propelled forth narratives of "inner city" Black life (death), whether accurate depictions or not. Discussions and observations of the regularity of Black death extend beyond Black communities and into national, and global, discourse. Luke Bergmann explores the near-deathness of Black life in Detroit in his 2010 ethnography *Getting Ghost*, which begins with his attending a funeral for a young person, something that he notes as a common occurrence in Detroit. An ethnography that traces the lives of young drug dealers both in and out of prison, the book exposes the regularity of Black death, both corporeal and social, specific to the Motor City.

The Beat Profile represented a space for healing, a space in which people, because of their identity as Detroiters, could partake in the joy of Black sounds as a means of reparation. The group voicing of "I should be dead" creates a sonic, discursive, and spatial sense of community. Extending upon Gaye Theresa Johnson's formulation of *spatial entitlement* (2013), in which marginalized communities fashion new senses of identity, place, and belonging via their collective disenfranchisement from larger sociopolitical, historical, and cultural structures, I am arguing that the repeated voicings of the phrase represent a sounded solidarity, a sounding of spatial entitlement born via the imposed deadness of Detroit, Blackness, and hip-hop. "I should be dead" becomes a hopeful phrase, a gravitation towards the space where Black knowledges, creation, and existence gain legibility. The sounds helped to solidify and proliferate spatial entitlement, an entitlement grasped through collective understanding of living in deadness. Group trauma can bring people together, and survival of that trauma requires group healing. To chant "I should be dead" in this context is to meditate, to reflect upon ones' survival, to celebrate life in supposed afterlives. I *should* be dead, according to what the world might tell you about Detroit; I *should* be dead, given my

proximity to so much urban deadness (particularly in that neighborhood, and on Detroit's east side more generally).

At the same time, such a phrase runs the risk of being interpreted as noise when falling on the wrong set of ears. It is unclear when the noise complaints began, or what was playing at the times that they happened, but the sentiment of a song like "ISBD" is what permeated The Beat Profile at all times. It was a space of group defiance of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, a democratic space for the echoing of Black sounds, regardless of the listener's identity. In the wrong set of ears, a phrase like "I should be dead" sounds like a challenge, a call from a group that needs to be put in their place. While it is conjectural to imagine that "ISBD" was blasting loudly enough for the neighbors who filed noise complaints to understand the lyrics, I am arguing here that all Black sounds, but particularly the sounds of hip-hop, are read in this "should be dead" way by white supremacist systems. Black sounds lead to both metaphorical killings, like the silencing of a hip-hop night and the closing of a business, and to literal killings, like the murder of Jordan Dunn.<sup>46</sup> All of the hip-hop played at The Beat Profile was chanting "I should be dead" to the white neighbors who needed Black sounds to die and the police who came in to kill the noise.

## **Dead Images**

The music video for "ISBD" opens in a black space, a space that serves as the container for the entire music video to come. Dimly lit in yellow and red tints with an occasional flash of blue or purple, ZelooperZ appears on screen, using a lighter to ignite a joint - his face becomes enveloped in smoke and he leans his head back, letting the cloud wash over him.

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<sup>46</sup> In a *Current Musicology* article on technologically-mediated Black sounds and silences, I argue that the "right to silence," which is largely unlegislated and generally espoused by white people as if it were, led a white man to kill Jordan Dunn for daring to infiltrate his sonic space, and therefore his whiteness, with Black sounds.

The colors quickly invert, then back again a few times, as the musical track begins to intensify. Within the first five seconds, the video - which should probably carry a warning for epileptic viewers - creates an overwhelming sense of anxiety through its use of darkness, frenetic cuts between camera angles, and the seemingly-erratic nature of its color changes. Superimposed over the images in a stark, but scribbled, handwritten text, a title screen reveals the song's artist, title, and producer. The carefully-curated scrawl and the quickly-flashing marks, squiggles, and strokes that appear behind it are a trademark of the music video's creator, the Bristol-based animator Russ Murphy, better known by his artist moniker RUFFMERCY. Those opening five seconds are the only time in the video that ZelooperZ appears without some sort of superimposed animation mark.

Mimicking the disorientation of the musical track, the video straddles the line between filmed and animated, overt and hidden, coherent and incomprehensible. As the recitation of "I should be dead" begins, animated words quickly appear and disappear across the screen, subliminally reinforcing the lyrics being spoken.



In particular, the hand-drawn word “dead” appears on screen nearly every time it is uttered in the song, often over the rapper’s face. RUFFMERCY invokes dead, skeletal imagery by dotting the rappers eyes, outlining his nose with a triangle, and dotting over his individual teeth. ‘Crossbones’ are also drawn behind ZelooperZ’s drawn-over face, his head becoming the skull in the iconic skull and crossbones symbol.



Every image in the video is fleeting; no frame exists long enough to get a firm grasp without watching the video at a much slower playback speed, and pausing the video often at that. While there is repetition in the animation in terms of the types of things that appear on screen, the variation is so constant and great that the animation never settles. RUFFMERCY and ZelooperZ use this highly-unstable music video to create an audiovisual hellscape, one that expertly reinforces the purgatorial lyrics, and the superimposition of deadness into life that ZelooperZ aims to create with his recording. While this rapidly-pivoting, jarring, scribbled animation style is typical of a RUFFMERCY-directed music video (see: Danny Brown, “ODB”; Memotone, “Bird Eating Spider”; J Dilla, “The Sickness”; etc.), in the context of “ISBD,” the instability of the video and the specific images used reinforce the song’s messaging on the precariousness of Black life. While ephemeral, every flashing “DEAD,” every superimposition of ZelooperZ with a skull and crossbones, every cloud of smoke reiterates that the Black subject *should* be dead, and that, perhaps, they have already

died. The accumulation of fleeting pictures creates a larger, always visible image of Black life as death.

## **Dead Words**

The evidence of our history continued to argue for some association between color and death, much as one might have wished it to be otherwise. As if in response, African American cultural practices—music, literature, and visual arts—all used the facts of black death and dying as their subject. There was an overlap of fiction and fact, artistic subject and streetscape, lyric and conversation. (Holloway 2002: 206)

I turn my focus to the song, offering a close reading and interpretation of sounds and lyrics as they relate to the larger structures of Black death and dying that, as scholars such as Christina Sharpe (2016), João Costa Vargas and Joy A. James (2012) have shown, are necessary in the formation and upkeep of the US's version of justice and democracy. It is horribly common to the point of banality for rappers to write lyrics about death and dying, be it near or far, state-sanctioned or extrajudicial (though I would argue that all Black death is at least state-approved, if not state-sanctioned), self-inflicted or inflicted by another, given or received. Some prominent examples come to mind without any extra research or committed brain power. 1982's "The Message" brought us Melle Mel rapping the cautionary tale:

Being used and abused to serve like hell,  
'Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell.  
It was plain to see that your life was lost,  
You was cold and your body swung back and forth  
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song  
Of how you lived so fast and died so young

N.W.A.s oft-replayed "Fuck tha Police" from 1988 opens with Ice Cube rapping,

Fuck the police, coming straight from the underground  
A young nigga got it bad cuz I'm brown  
And not the other color so police think

They have the authority to kill a minority

In “Mind Playing Tricks On Me” by the Geto Boys (1991), rapper Scarface tells the ongoing story of fear and paranoia of death with lyrics like “Some might say take a chill, B; but fuck that shit, there’s a nigga tryna kill me!” In 1994, Notorious B.I.G. released his debut album, ominously titled *Ready To Die*. That album featured many tracks that dealt explicitly with death, like the lyric “I don’t wanna live no mo’, sometimes I hear death knockin’ at my front door” from the chorus of “Everyday Struggle,” or a brutal track called “Suicidal Thoughts” in which Biggie raps lyrics that are difficult for me to even reproduce in print (the track ends with the sound of a gunshot, assumedly a self-inflicted one to the head). Mobb Deep’s 1995 single “Shook Ones, Part II” unleashes a 19-year-old Prodigy, rapping:

I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous,  
You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers  
The Mobb comes equipped for warfare, beware of my crime family  
Who got 'nough shots to share for all of those who wanna profile and pose.  
Rock you in your face, stab your brain with your nose bone,  
You all alone in these streets, cousin.  
Every man for they self in this land we be gunnin',  
And keep them shook crews runnin', like they supposed to

Even a seemingly lighthearted song like Nelly’s “Country Grammar” (2000) opens with the lyric “I’m going down down baby, your street in a Range Rover, street sweeper baby, cocked ready to let it go,” oddly interpolating the children’s clapping game “Down Down, Baby” with lyrics about semiautomatic weapons primed for drive-by shootings. In 2015, Kendrick Lamar rhymed “And we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho” in his track “Alright.” This list could continue for thousands of pages. What is clear is that the topic of death is ubiquitous in hip-hop, to the point of being a genre convention. As a music primarily



populated by Black male artists, it is unsurprising that death would feature so frequently - our reality is death. The links between Blackness, hip-hop, and death are inextricable.

What sets ZelooperZ “ISBD” apart from these songs lyrically is the operation of the word *should*. It is an admission of a fact that we all know, an associating of Blackness with death that is always already coupled and cannot be torn asunder/ To say “I should be dead” as a Black man in the United States is to question the reality of Blackness itself. The ‘should’ exists in a liminal, purgatorial space, and is a questioning of Black identity...almost as if to ask “If I am not dead, am I not Black?” According to Sharpe:

The ongoing state sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it is the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities for rupture might be opened up? What happens when we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an “I” or a “we” who know, an “I” or a “we” who care. (Sharpe 2016: 7)

Taking as a basic foundation that US democracy requires Black death, “ISBD” represents a rupture in the ongoing afterlives of slavery by questioning whether or not Blackness and liveness can truly be reconciled in a white supremacist “democratic” system that requires (and demands) Black death. As argued by Hari Ziyad in their 2017 article on the (non)place of Blackness in a “Postwhite world,” ideas of Blackness are incongruous with the idea of humanity under whiteness. Black liberation cannot be achieved through white conceptions of humanity; Blackness must operate through this imposed deadness to achieve its own goals in the system of white supremacy. Far from cynicism, deadness is a transcendent category, a space for creation that operates outside of whiteness. In this way, “I should be dead” is transformative, arguably the blackest lyric a rapper could ever pen.

What does it mean as a Black man to proclaim that you should be dead, in a city that has been pronounced both Black and dead - again, the two are synonymous anywhere where white supremacy is the organizing ideology. It is an admission that death is what is supposed to happen to Black bodies. Termination is the expected outcome. It simultaneously admits the plan of white supremacy while sarcastically pointing to its failure. It is an active remembering of injustices both past and present, a lamentation on the state in which a Black man might find himself, a confessional of the detrimental behaviors one has engaged in as a result of unresolved and ongoing traumas. The phrase is also a weapon, delivered with defiant venom from the tongue of a self-destructive man in a society that looks to destroy him if he does not destroy himself. Throughout the song, ZelooperZ recounts past traumas that often lead to Black death, some self-inflicted, some not: drug addiction, homelessness, gun violence, HIV/AIDS, hunger.

ISBD is transformed when considered through the lens of wake work<sup>47</sup>, and heard within the always already deadness of Black life in the US, living what Christina Sharpe calls “the afterlives of property.” These afterlives are not merely history, or a past. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in *Silencing the Past* (1997), “The Past - or, more accurately, pastness - is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.” The lyrics frustrate the “pastness” of trauma, bringing it into the present, showing a pastness that is not past; in the wake, the trauma comes from a past that is not past. Trauma is lived constantly. “ISBD”, then, performs multiple functions. It is a shouting down of this clear and present everyday trauma, not allowing it to be past/healed; it is wake work, an artist navigating life in the wake

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<sup>47</sup> In Christina Sharpe’s formulation, wake work is a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [of living, surviving (and more) in the afterlives of slavery] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives (18). It’s imagining otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery.

left by slavery's afterlives including institutional racism, state violence, and constant, immediate threats to Black life; it is voiced consciousness and awareness of the Black state of non/being in the US (wokeness). It eulogizes the un/dead, reifies notions of Black identity/recognition through death (the wake).

## **Dead Sounds**

With all of its ups and downs, comings and goings, highs and lows, presences and absences, the sounds of the beat drop listeners into a place of controlled chaos, steadied only by the repetition of "I should be dead." The track induces disequilibrium, forcing a juxtaposition between purposefully sinister sounds and harmonies with dolphin noises - a producer tag<sup>48</sup> meant to remind listeners of the beat's producer, Bulletproof Dolphin. As the song progresses, more and more rhythmic groundings appear, from short bursts of drum rolls on an 808 synthesizer to a consistent hi-hat rhythm that appears at the beginning of the first verse. These anchoring sounds, however, are constantly refigured. They are momentarily cut out or combined in a new way; they change in pitch, frequency, and intensity; sonic filters are added and removed, making old sounds sound new and new sounds sound old. Voices swirl in the background, causing the ear to question the dimensions of the space it inhabits and the nature of temporality itself. Maybe those voices were always there in your head, but maybe you're hearing things. The track is sonically cluttered and confusing, an appropriate setting for a song like "ISBD" that questions the "presence" of life and the liveliness of death.

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<sup>48</sup> These identifying sound bites, known as producer tags are commonplace in rap, generally happening near the beginning of the track, or even spoken/sung by the artist using the beat. Some popular current examples include producer Mustard's "Mustard on the beat, ho"; Kenny Beats' "Whoa Kenny!"; Metro Boomin's "If young Metro don't trust you, I'm gon' shoot you" and "Metro Boomin' want some more, nigga."

“ISBD” sounds alarming, and it remains alarming even after multiple listens. It begins with a slow crescendo and sound that seems to also be getting spatially closer and higher in pitch. Suddenly, the thud of a sub bass and a kick drum, and the incantation “I should be dead” begins. ZelooperZ sounds pained, frantic, his voice already strained at the beginning of the song, a passionate delivery that is only a couple steps away from screaming.<sup>49</sup> The lyric “I should be dead” opens like a battering ram, clearing space in your aural cavity by force, forcing you to contend with the noisiness of such an assertion, both sonically and metaphorically. Screaming “I should be dead” is the polar opposite of silence, of sonic deadness.

I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
Thank I ain't dead  
I should be dead  
Follow my motives I'm walking like dead  
Stuck in my ways  
I'm ending they days  
I should be dead  
I should be dead  
But they ain't dead  
Fuck with the case  
Hammy to face  
Fucking her face  
Checking her pulse  
She sound dead  
In Heaven she should be there

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<sup>49</sup> The delivery, and the song’s “meaning” itself, is even more alarming when taking into account ZelooperZ suffers from asthma.

Notwithstanding the last few lines of the hook, which are horribly, horribly quotidian within a broader style of rap we might consider “horrorcore” (see Chapter Four), this chorus is essentially a constant reiteration of what ZelooperZ believes to be true, and what I am choosing to read through Sharpe, Hartman, Moten, James, Costa Vargas, and others: Black humanity and being are incongruous with white supremacy and the state, which is a tool of and space for white supremacy. To repeat “I should be dead” seemingly ad nauseum is almost boring in context. It’s a fact that we always already know. Yet the phrase does real work in the world

ZelooperZ disrupts the wake by performing this wake work for his own funeral which has not yet occurred, but is supposed to. He is laying the groundwork for his wake, while being in the wake. He acknowledges that his death is not only inevitable - like the saying goes, the only sure things are death and taxes - but is expected, imminent. This is a key difference when Black artists perform songs about death in the US and other places globally where white supremacy is the rule of law. It becomes less a statement of defiance and more a statement of incredulity. Black death is not meant to happen by way of nature and the inevitable marching on of time; it is meant to *happen*, forced upon. We’re meant to be killed. Being killed and dying are vastly different.

I can't be wed  
Can't lose my head  
Can't feel my body  
That Xan and that Molly  
That Shroom and the X  
Henny and Jenny  
Addies and I ain't say lean  
All of the shit that I did  
I should be dead  
Functioning fiend  
I should be dead  
But before I lay to rest

Ima get bread (x2)

The opening utterance in Zakes Mda's 1995 novel *Ways of Dying* is "There are many ways of dying!" (Mda 1995: 3). Yes, death is ubiquitous to life. Yes, many cultures have rituals around dying. Yes, many *music* cultures traffic heavily in death and dying and write songs about it. But, as Karla Holloway asserts, how *we* die is different. African American death is *different*: the immanence of it, the ever-looming specter of it, the presentness of the pastness of it. Inhabiting a country that relied on our deaths to come into its life has meant that our deaths will always have different weight for Black people. One might get the sense that there is a nihilism that accompanies ZelooperZ's assertion that he should be dead and his enumeration of why...but wake work is not nihilistic. While he cites his drug use and experimentation as the reason he should be dead in this section, it does not have the typical air of braggadocio that often accompanies rap lyrics about drug use. It's painful. It's stating disbelief that the combination of life in the wake, and his self-medicating to potentially escape the weight of the wake - however temporary the escape - have not ended his life. There is no such thing as premature death for Black people in the US; our deaths are normalized at all ages. Additionally, behaviors that are viewed as self-destructive within broader societal norms, such as drug use, are complexly interwoven with agency and subjectivity. For a person who is pronounced dead though they live, controlling the means of death destabilizes notions of an entropic life and places the power in the hands of the subject (JanMohamed 2005).

## **ISBD and the Problem of "Liveness"**

In an interview with Edwin Ortiz of *Complex*, ZelooperZ was asked in particular about “ISBD,” and about the music video for the track, which had recently been released at the date of the interview.

**Since the song is titled “I Should Be Dead,” What are five things you want to do or achieve before you go?**

1. Buy my mother a house.
2. Travel to see most of the world to try to understand cultures and see the art.
3. See my nephew grown into an enlightened soldier and a man I want him to stay woke.
4. Be a well-known artist and have growth amongst the years leave behind a legacy and inspire people [while alive].
5. I been gone.

The first two responses from ZelooperZ are fairly typical of artists and athletes, regardless of race, though they carry significance within a Black culture that has been disenfranchised in the housing market and often not afforded the opportunity to travel. They have to do with financial means, the dream of having so much money that you can *actually* do what you want without fear of poverty/bankruptcy. His final three responses, however, are chillingly Black. Beyond associations with Blackness and Afrofutures, enlightenment, mysticism, wokeness, there is the very real, fully-justified fear that young Black boys will not live to see adulthood, or if they do live to see adulthood, it will be in state custody. That ZelooperZ would consider it an achievement to be alive long enough to see his nephew live into adulthood is a telling example of the normalization of Black death at all ages. There is no premature death for Black life in a white supremacist system. Many artists desire notoriety and wish to make an impact on the world. It’s the brackets that he includes, “[while alive],” that speak to the problem of Blackness being recognized/fully-realized only through death. In a talk on the ongoing, transhistorical legacy of slavery given at Dartmouth College on October 17, 2019,

Jared Sexton discussed the problem of visual representations of Emmett Till in the art world, Black artists wanting to convey gravity without further conveying trauma, and the controversy of white artist Dana Schutz' painting "Open Casket (2016)." One of the conclusions was that it was massively important to depict Till as a living, breathing Black boy, and that he deserved recognition, and humanity, as a live person - he is more than an avatar of death, and his recognizability as a living human should transcend the oft-reproduced images of his death. I'm reminded of a gospel song that I grew up hearing in the house that stated its title in the opening lyric: "give me my flowers while I yet live." The sentiment expressed in this song, and in ZelooperZ's statement, is that Black life deserves recognition while it is still *life*, before it turns into eulogy. Lastly, the final and most succinct response given by the rapper is sincere in its brevity.

"I been gone."

Though there seems to be incongruity in saying both "I should be dead" and "I been gone," the latter implying that the death that *should* have happened *did* occur, they are similar phrases in the context of Blackness. I should be dead comes across with a tinge of incredulity, shock that the recording can even happen because one both *is* and *should be* dead. ZelooperZ demonstrates a Black intimacy with death with which white people, and many non-Black people, cannot empathize.

## **Deading with Liveness**



While I have seen ZelooperZ perform - twice, at the time of this writing - I have yet to be in person for a 'live' performance<sup>51</sup> of "ISBD." The category of liveness is fraught with semiotic baggage, and it becomes more complicated when the performer is focused on performing deadness, as I would argue is the case for this track. There is a lone video on YouTube of ZelooperZ performing this song in front of an audience, and it is a partial recording - it only captures the song from the second iteration of the chorus to the end. The fact that it is a replayable video mediated on YouTube certainly means that the performance is already dead, as live performances can only happen once and in-person experience is taken as a primary marker of liveness. But there is a different deadness that pervades this performance. In multiple resurrections and re-viewings of this performance, I was struck by the gravity of performing such a song publicly, the nature of the audience for whom he performed and the implications of his words for that audience, and what it means to perform deadness live.

According to Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, deadness is a way to note the strong associations that have always existed between death and sound recording technologies, associations that have been noted in a number of ways, from the use of recordings as body preservation (Sterne 2003); to their use as a means of "complex forms of rearticulation" (Stanyek and Piekut 2010); to the aesthetic of deadness being that which places listeners in a "displaced context of private audition," articulating a space that is private, personal, definitely "not live," and only achievable through technological reproduction in individual musical experiences (Novak 2013). While obviously informed by

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<sup>51</sup> I find myself questioning what the implications of "liveness" and "live performance" are when it comes to "dead" material. My two main search queries to find a performance were "zelooperz live" and "zelooperz dead."

these formulations of deadness, I use ‘deadness’ otherwise. Black people exist in a state of constant *dying* in the US. While this statement may seem banal, or even irrelevant if one considers human bodies as constantly in a state of dying from their moment of birth, the distinction is that Black people, who are viewed as *nonhuman* within the rubrics of white supremacist formulations of citizenship and existence itself, are constantly being killed, and subjected to their own killing, to the point that premature ends are an expectation. Death is a state in which Black people dwell. But I wish to view death, and deadness, not as antonyms to life or liveness. Rather, I view deadness as a state of non/being<sup>52</sup>, an (non)existence that is always already dead in spaces of whiteness, and does not register as “live” by white standards, but nonetheless is self-sustaining, flourishing and present. Deadness is a space of what I will refer to as *radical Black presence*, a space on continual non/life that is not bound to typical temporal formulations of death as the end of a timeline. Rather than being bound to a traumatic past that is constantly conjured into the present and the future, deadness frees one up to do something in a perceived space of trauma. While Black artistic creations often reflect upon, reiterate, or continue traditions that can be traced back to the ancestors, what Robert Farris Thompson referred to as flash[es] of the spirit (1983), the radical Black presence of deadness allows artists to produce in a space where there is no need to reproduce the past, and no need to reproduce “living” artifacts of that past.

As Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews (2009) note in “Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture: Depictions of Homicide in Rap Music,” homicide has been “appropriated” by successful rappers as a central, reoccurring theme in their music. Homicide, a violent enactment of death, is often represented with lyrics about killing or being killed in rap music. Hunnicutt and Andrews are careful to note that beyond depictions of homicide, there has

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<sup>52</sup> Terminology used by Christina Sharpe to describe the liminal state of Black subjectivity (2016).

been an appropriation of the word “killing,” and that this word can mean other things beyond the literal ending of a life, most notably, as an indicator of rap skill/prowess and creative success.<sup>53</sup> They specifically opt to use “homicide” rather than “killing” because of these discrepancies. Similarly, “dead” exists in multiple registers in Black spaces, particularly in virtual Black spaces like Black Twitter or Black pop culture, criticism, and opinion websites like *Bossip* and *The Root*. While discussions of death and dying are quite commonplace in Black life and Black communities, “dead” has taken on a life of its own, indicating many things ranging from finding something extremely humorous (“I’m dead,” or simply “dead” used as reaction), to noting - or questioning - the seriousness of something (“deadass”). But given prior music released by ZelooperZ, his interview responses, and the lyrics of the particular song being interpreted, it is clear that he is not invoking these other understandings and uses of death, and is talking about mortality. ZelooperZ is deliberate and heavy-handed in the enumeration of the things that could kill him, from substance abuse, to unprotected sex, to bullet wounds, to homelessness. Yet through all of these possibilities for premature death, ZelooperZ does not state that he *could* have died at any of these points. He raps that he *should* be dead. This implies a type of agency that I am arguing exists in the space of deadness; it is as if he is deliberately trying to meet death in stating that he should. It lands on the ears like a statement from someone who has tried, unsuccessfully, to reach a state of deadness and is exasperated at trying. The recording, in all of its forced disorientation, represents a purgatorial note from a non/being who is working to realize their identity through a radical Black presence.

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<sup>53</sup> Common examples include words and phrases like “killin’ it,” “bodying” (a riff on putting a body in a bodybag after homicide), “murked” (slang for murdered), “deaded”, and so on.

In a video shared to YouTube by user Adam Skorupskas on January 7, 2016, ZelooperZ appears on stage supported by a crew of no fewer than 15 people - presumably members of the Detroit hip-hop crew to which he belongs, known as Bruiser Brigade. Standing at a towering 6'5", his skinny, lanky frame stands out against the backdrop of bodies. He first hops, skips, then paces back and forth across the stage, casually rapping over the recorded - and therefore already dead - track to "ISBD," sounding almost tired and uninterested in comparison to the recorded song. The audience hops up in down in accordance with the rapper, generally settling down and switching to motioning with hands in the air while grounded. As ZelooperZ performs the second verse, he is understated, subdued as if he is conserving energy. The crew backing him on stage telegraphs what's to come through their interactions with each other and with the audience. Bruiser Brigade mainstay SKWLKR bends down low with his arms outstretched, motioning in a way one typically does to get a crowd to calm/quiet down, but it quickly morphs into a knowing dance. Four counts before the next drop of the chorus, the entire stage is erect, building momentum for the next moment - they've telegraphed the energy. As the chilling incantation "*I should be dead!*" begins once more, it is as if the stage explodes. ZelooperZ is no longer rapping, he is just jumping with an infectious frenetic energy, willing the crowd to do the same. Crew members sling water on the audience, eventually tossing the empty bottles into the crowd. The entire time, the chant can be clearly heard, as a crew member with a microphone and the audience have taken over performing it. ZelooperZ occasionally picks up his microphone to join in with an utterance of the chant, but it is as if the song is out of his hands. A stark contrast becomes readily apparent in the fervor and ecstasy produced in this

moment. The vast majority of the audience, at least within the frame of this particular camera, is white.

### **Who Should Be Dead?**

“I should be dead” means different things from different tongues. Given the origination of the song by a Black artist - one who is hyperaware of his Blackness, to that end - the phrase carries immense weight historically and *transhistorically*. Reflecting on observations made earlier in this chapter, the associations of Blackness with death and dying are different than typical [read: white] associations between humanity and death. It is the operation of *should* that is so nefarious in this context. Death is *supposed* to be the ‘state of being’ for Black bodies within white supremacy - there is no space, no place for our liveness. There is an obvious conundrum in that performers on stage, particularly within hip-hop, lead their audiences to participate, regardless of who is in the audience. This is within the tradition of the music, its origins in house parties and DJ culture, wherein an emcee would “rock the mic” to liven up the party, to encourage participation, etc. As the audiences for particular kinds of rap, especially mainstream rap, have shifted to being largely white, Black performers have run into the issue of white audiences performing along with material that they consume though it isn’t necessarily *for* them to emulate. Most music is meant to be heard by someone, and it is naive to assume that an album could be released and only fall on the ears of one particular demographic. Yet it is typically understood that, for a lot of hip-hop, white people can consume it whether or not they relate to it, to the Blackness of it. This conundrum typically expresses itself through lyrics, and the use of the word “nigga.” It *should* be understood by white people, and really all non-Black people, that this is a word to which they do not have spoken access - due to a pastness that is not past, it means something

quite different coming from the mouths of non-Black people than it does from Black people. In 2018, rapper Kendrick Lamar invited a white fan onstage to perform with him at a show in Alabama, even cautioning her that she “only had to bleep one word” during the performance of his song “m.A.A.d city.” Within the first 20 seconds of the song, she had folded on her end of the bargain, leading Lamar to stop the song and dismiss her, amidst her pleas and apologies that she was “used to singing it as [he] wrote it.” While the specific situation concerning ZelooperZ’s track is different - in fact, the ‘n-word’ does not appear on this record - the context and the structural problem are similar. Black utterances, which are often always-already imbued with a fraught transhistorical legacy of trauma, simply don’t mean the same thing spoken by white tongues.

This performance toes the line between participation and voyeurism. There is such a strong legacy of black performances for white audiences that it is difficult to not view this performance through that lens. Beyond the history of enslaved people being forced to perform for their “master’s” parties (Cruz 1999), emancipation and reconstruction saw the rise of blackface performances for all white audiences - the white obsession with Black bodies as entertainment was so strong that white people sought to replicate it without Black people present (Roediger 1991; Lott 1993). There is also the ugly history of lynching throughout the United States, in which white people would turn out in droves to watch the torture and executions of Black people for crimes that they did not commit. Lynching is the arguably the most grotesque example of Black death for white entertainment, and I am not arguing that ZelooperZ performing “ISBD” for white people is the same thing as white people going to see a lynching. However, the discourse around both is similar because of the white gaze upon Black death/utterances of death. Additionally, it is widely understood that

white youth are hip-hop's largest consumer group, despite incongruous subjectivities and life experiences with those experienced on records - incongruities that some white youth may attempt to solve through mimicry of style or even participation in criminal activity (Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley 2009). The cultural capital and coolness that Blackness accrues can be consumed and used and banked by white people, even if Black bodies are not present (Summers 2019).

In 2018 I argued that Blackness is seen as neurotic/abnormal against the backdrop of white supremacist "normalcy" through a close reading of a music video by Detroit rapper Danny Brown (Blue V 2018). Brown is ZelooperZ's mentor and the de facto leader of the aforementioned Bruiser Brigade. Though the chapter was largely about these narratives of "normalcy," much of my writing discussed the voyeuristic white gaze, particularly upon Black bodies in pain/suffering. In the sitcom-styled music video, Danny Brown spirals into self-destruction, all while asking the white family that surrounds him for help and being met with dismissive remarks or laughter from an in-video "live studio audience." Brown breaks the fourth wall, communicating directly with the all-white audience as he bleeds to death on the ground after being stabbed by an anthropomorphized Xanax tab. The audience responds with pure joy, taking in the spectacle for their entertainment. I imagine a similar scene of subjection when viewing ZelooperZ's performance before a white audience. Though the audience is chanting along, it is as if they are chanting "*you* should be dead." The contrast between performer and audience is even more stark when considering the performances of ZelooperZ past, many of which are accessible via YouTube. In particular, his recorded performances from 2011, around the time of his debut mixtape *Coon N The Room: Eating Ramen Noodles While Watching Roots on Bootleg*, appear to be in front of entirely Black

audiences. Videos of ZelooperZ performing his song “White Faces” provide an interesting contrast to the video of his “ISBD” performance. “White Faces” blends quotidian hip-hop narratives around strip clubs and strippers with critiques of the racism embedded into the US monetary system. ZelooperZ raps:

Cause it's a fuckin' celebration  
Through all the years of enslavement we be still discriminatin'  
So, I think, I think it's our time to get racist  
Pull out them Ben Franklins and we start the segregation

Through the reference of throwing money for dancers, ZelooperZ ironically comments on the iconography of our “Founding Fathers,” stating that all he throws are “white faces.”

In these performances, the audience that appears in the frame is Black. The embodied and vocalized crowd participation is as fervent as the participation by white attendees observable in the 2016 performance of “ISBD.” Yet it is difficult to imagine the audience for “ISBD” participating along with a performance of “White Faces.” In addition to this track, *Coon N The Room* contains songs such as “You A Nigger” and “Nigga Ain’t All Colored People [NAACP].” Participation with these songs, and indeed with a project titled *Coon N The Room*, requires a cultural intimacy<sup>54</sup> that is largely inaccessible to non-Black audiences, but particularly inaccessible to white audiences. This earlier work also reveals ZelooperZ’s hyperawareness of his marginalized status, and his sarcastic responses to - and reconfigurations of - his imposed subalternity. “I should be dead,” then, falls into an identity narrative that ZelooperZ has reified throughout his entire career. The makeup of the audience has shifted, and so ZelooperZ has shifted his delivery to one that means the same thing to

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<sup>54</sup> Taken from the title of Michael Herzfeld’s 1999 monograph, the author defines the term as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.”



him, but that can be performed in front of white people. But as he stated in his interview with *Complex*, he's "been gone."

## Conclusion

ZelooperZ's already-been-gone-ness suggests that he creates from a place of deadness as radical Black presence. His sense of liminality and should-be-deadness is also informed by his upbringing and life in Detroit, which was in a state of constant disruption. In a 2014 interview with *Complex*'s Edwin Ortiz, ZelooperZ notes that in Detroit it was "kind of rough growing up as a kid." He recalls a childhood unable to be firmly rooted in one place:

Yeah, we got evicted a lot. One time, we had to stay at a Residence Inn for like two weeks. My grandpa had to end up paying for it and shit because we were homeless. I moved probably like 15 times in my life...and sometimes, even on the same block. Like, two times I lived on the same block twice, around the corner from each other. I stayed in a couple hoods in Detroit, like on the Eastside and Westside too. I stayed all over Detroit basically (Ortiz 2014).

These experiences reflect larger narratives of poverty and spatial fracture common in the stories of Detroit's majority Black population, particularly those considered blue collar workers, or those that are underemployed. Yet it is also apparent that these dark experiences have informed the way ZelooperZ views positive creative endeavors. In a 2016 interview with HipHopDX's Ural Garrett, the rapper reflects on his then upcoming project, *Bothic*, on which "ISBD" is the final track:

*Bothic* is just blackness with sparkles. It's light in everything. If I was smoking a blunt in the dark and didn't have any lights on in the room, that's what *Bothic* is. Just the tip of the blunt. You know it's there and getting you high, but it's so black you don't know where it's coming from (Garrett 2016).

While ZelooperZ uses “black” in this statement to refer to the absence of light, his statement read through the framework I’ve suggested in this chapter points to the idea of radical Black presence. Deadness, the space for radical Black presence to emanate, is this illumination in the darkness.

Admittedly, it brings me great pleasure every time I have the opportunity to play this song for a new initiate. Part of this joy comes from my knowledge of the song’s abrasive nature, the organized cacophony of it all, with its screeches and thuds and dolphin sounds. The strained, high-pitched vocal delivery is the cherry on top. I know that it sounds unlike what is expected from a rap song, and I know that it is guaranteed to elicit a reaction from a new listener. I bask in the knowledge of the song’s peaks and valleys, when the beat will drop, when the breaks will happen. But mostly, I revel in the knowledge of the eponymous phrase’s multiple meanings, and the way those meanings shift at different times, in different spaces, and in different ears. *I should be dead* can be heard as open defiance to the death that failed to take you away, but could just as soon be heard as a testimony, a telling of God’s intervention and deliverance from evil within the Black church tradition. The use of “should” sets this song apart from typical narratives of escaping death within hip-hop, which typically use “could.” To claim one could have died is almost a nod towards luck, while to claim that one should have died implies that the death was warranted - and expected. “Should” signals a disruption in a process meant to occur. But, as I have argued, *I should be dead* can also signal a magnetic pull towards the transformative space of radical Black presence. The radical Black presence to which I refer is not reliant on meeting an untimely death, nor is it linked to dominant cultural ideas about life, liberty, and the like. The space of radical Black presence

lies in the omnipresent, looming probability of death that is a feature of Black life, but not of the lives of the dominant culture.

## 4. The Horror

Up to this point, I have discussed multiple linkages between death and Detroit, from the narratives of dead city in need of resuscitation utilized by institutions interested in gentrification and profit, to “noise killing” and uneven application of law enforcement in response to noise complaints in gentrifying areas of the city, to theories of deadness and living in a state of deadness as radical Black presence in Detroit. But these narratives of dead city are complicated by a locally proliferated rap subgenre known as horrorcore, where Detroit is transmogrified from dead city into the monstrous city that kills. In this chapter, I explore the multivalent politics and poetics of the subgenre of rap known as horrorcore. The origins of the style are somewhat disputed, but the local notoriety of an artist named Esham popularized the subgenre in Detroit, and the city arguably boasts the highest number of rappers that could be considered horrorcore artists. While there is no formalized, explicit single definition of what constitutes horrorcore music among artists, a majority of the music that is labeled as horrorcore shares common lyrical and sonic practices and aims to elicit an affective response of shock from the listener - musical practices Esham refers to as “Wicket Shit.” I argue that this coalescence of practices constitutes a poetics of horrorcore. Extending upon Michael Herzfeld's notion of social poetics ([1997] 2005), Adam Krims' proposal of a "poetics of music" (2000) - not to be confused with Stravinsky's ghostwritten manuscript that bares this phrase as a title - and Alex Chavez's theorization of “aural poetics” (2017), I gesture towards Julia Kristeva's theorizations of horror and the abject (1980) to reveal techniques of a musical style that relies upon societal norms being "both perpetuated and reworked through the deformation of social conventions in everyday interaction" (Herzfeld

[1997] 2005: 37) to create a sense of shock and horror for the listener. Building upon the idea of poetics, particularly as applied to musical practices, and relying heavily on sonic and lyrical analysis, I probe music from Detroit horrorcore artists to reveal a shared logic and poetics of horrorcore that refers back to the city of Detroit, particularly to narratives of the city as dead and decaying.

On my first trip to Detroit in 2014, I remember how easy it was to gawk. It was a place I'd only seen or heard about on the news, in popular culture depictions, or in YouTube videos describing it as the quintessential dangerous American city. Jaz, a friend I'd made through my father who had kindly offered to let me stay at his place while I was in town to present at a conference, picked me up from the airport. As I'd never been to the city, he offered to give me a quick tour. There were so many stark contrasts, seemingly unnatural juxtapositions between bright and dark,<sup>55</sup> whole and broken,<sup>56</sup> living and dead. Initially, I did not think of the city as a site of ruin exploration. But as we continued to drive around neighborhoods and my eyes readjusted to the scene, I noticed how many people were still *living* there. This was different than Rome or Athens, with modernity built around ancient ruins. This was not Chernobyl, an uninhabitable reminder of epic disaster. Detroit's ruins are contemporary but often treated in popular culture as if they are past - ancient and uninhabited. This friction contributes to an ongoing erasure of the city's predominantly Black inhabitants while promoting a vision of Detroit-as-ghost-town. As Rebecca Kinney theorizes, the twenty-first century has seen a shift in how Detroit is viewed, and this is marked through the "racially coded signification of the return of white people and the seeming disappearance

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<sup>55</sup> Before Mayor Mike Duggan led an initiative to install LED streetlights, many areas of the city were unlit. It was common to see blocks with few to no working streetlights next to blocks that were fully-lit.

<sup>56</sup> Notably, there was a Whole Foods in midtown Detroit, within a short distance from abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and an overburdened shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

of black people in the 2010s narrative of Detroit's comeback: (2016: xv). Through contemporary depictions of the city, Kinney conceptualizes the representation of Detroit as a *beautiful wasteland*, noting that "rather than a city marred by grotesque remains and pathological residents, what emerges in the twenty-first-century depiction of Detroit is the city's perceived emptiness and the idea of Detroit's ruin as beautiful" (ibid). The topography of Detroit is shocking, yet voyeurs looking to experience the city's "edginess" and find good photo opportunities, real estate developers looking to cash in on said edginess, and investors bankrolling them are disinterested in the difficulties faced by marginalized peoples living in ruined conditions; they see the condition of these areas as opportunity. This is due to what Kinney rightly identifies as a tendency to view the city as untamed frontier. Even as the city appears shocking, and viewers may be mystified and shocked by the ruins, there is a tendency to gaze upon them as if they happened long ago, and not as if they are the result of ongoing disinvestment and underdevelopment. Contemporary ruins present a dissonance in the city of Detroit that lends itself to artistic interpretation.

Fuck jail time  
Fuck if you're twelve or nine years old  
You'll get a dildo in your ear hole  
-King Gordy, "Vader" (2012)

Detroit rapper King Gordy makes shocking, ruinous music, firmly situated within a subgenre of rap known as horrorcore. Horrorcore music is defined through its extreme, disturbing subject matter<sup>57</sup> that is often performed over musical background tracks, or beats, that are meant to sound equally demented or unsettling through various means including the sampling of material associated with horror, production techniques that obscure pitch and

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<sup>57</sup> Topics such as suicide, rape/sexual assault, serial killing, infanticide, and the like are commonplace to the point of being genre convention.

melody, and a heavy reliance of minor modes and dissonance in a Western European musical framework. In a podcast interview<sup>58</sup>, host Jon Beatty asks King Gordy about the grotesque nature of his music:

**Jon:** I kinda had wondered with your lyrics kinda being as outrageous and all that as they are to a lot of people who aren't into the genre, is there a line for you? Like do you have a line where even you are like "damn that's too much I can't fucking say that."

**King Gordy:** No, because everything that I've ever really said, I've seen in the news.

**J:** That's a good point, that is true.

**KG:** But you know what, that's funny to me. People will go on the internet, [watch] the news, and they'll see all this shocking stuff...but when I say it they just get so offended, that's weird to me.

Gordy identifies an incongruity in the way people interpret similar narrative material through different mediums. In his view, if people regularly interact with shocking information through watching the news or reading the paper - and I would add watching crime television, horror films, listening to true crime podcasts, taking Detroit ruins tours, etc. - and they often gravitate towards it because of (or in spite of) the atrocity, it is inconsistent that they would suddenly be offended by the same shocking information when delivered via the often fictional depictions in his music, no matter how extreme. Along with a long history of biases towards rap music that exist in the zeitgeist (see Chapter Three), the fact these depictions of horrifying events are transmitted through the medium of music undoubtedly contributes to the abject affective response elicited by horrorcore. But in a similar fashion to the way voyeurs are desensitized to the horrors of Detroit's contemporary ruins, one can become deadened to the music created by King Gordy and other horrorcore artists. There is pleasure

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<sup>58</sup> BREWtally Speaking Podcast, Episode 64

to be found in the patterns, wordplay, samples, the absurdity - the poetics of horrorcore.

Detroit horrorcore serves as a distorted, disturbing avatar of the city itself.

## **Poetics**

The term ‘poetics’ has been taken up by a number of scholars, from cultural theorists to ethnomusicologists. It is often a useful term for talking about discourses and the relationality between language, culture, aesthetics, and society. Discourses in and around music can be considered part of music’s poetics, as can criticism of music, and music theory itself. Within studies of music, scholars have often employed the term poetics primarily to refer to themes made apparent by lyrics, to the relationships between musical aesthetics and musical practice, or to refer to the way various musical elements come together to create affective responses in the listener. Specifically, I am interested in a rhetorical poetics of horrorcore shown through lyrics, the ways in which artists deploy particular language over particular soundscapes as a means of eliciting the response of shock or disgust from various (particular) audiences. In order for the music to be heard as affectively shocking, horrorcore relies on interrelationships between language and sounds that are perceived as irregular, uncomfortable, or dissonant. My invocation of poetics, then, is not wholly distinct from those of other scholars; I seek to build upon this work, and to turn the focus towards horrorcore music.

Alex Chavez uses the term “aural poetics” to refer to the “dialogic interplay between embodiment and aesthetics” (2017: 7), sonically extending José E. Limón’s conceptualization of cultural poetics as “acts of cultural interpretation focused on aesthetically salient, culturally embedded textualities and enactments” (1994: 14). By invoking aural poetics, Chavez specifically looks to “explore musico-poetic textualities made legible through a relational process of sonic enactment and reception, a process that possesses its own social aesthetic sensibility, or poetics” (2017: 7). As Chavez theorizes, we



hear sounds *only* in culturally specific, subjective terms, and our hearing is informed by forms of listening that are always already culturally and historically situated. In other words, our hearing is indebted to vast networks of social meanings built around sounds and specific cultural affective definitions, and aural poetics is a way of exploring this discourse and the way that sounds both inform and are informed by the cultural world around them. Chavez's invocations of Aaron Fox and José E. Limón are also helpful for understanding the affective power of aural poetics. Recalling the expressiveness and power in Texas white working-class voices, Chavez notes that Fox writes, "The voice stands for the embodied, socially embedded self; it stands also for a communal identity in which that self has a particular and irreducible dignity. The fragile but necessary living human voice, in all its individual embodied thought and felt particularity, and in all its iconic social symbolism and situational indexicality, is the vigorous poetic entextualization . . . of a cherished critical 'ordinariness'" (2004: 42–43). Limón made similar observations about working-class Mexican Americans in South Texas a decade prior, noting that their expressive practices mark "a critical difference of consciousness in antagonistic contradistinction" to dominant white culture (1994: 117) (Chavez 2017: 7-8).

Past and more recent work by ethno/musicologists shows the salience of poetics in research on humans musicking.<sup>59</sup> In fact, ethnomusicology, being overwhelmingly concerned with people and the music they make and with which they interact, is well-suited to invoke poetics, as it is a powerful, discursive way to interrogate the uses of music and language towards specific ends. An array of poetic focuses have entered the field, like the poetics of place (Lipsitz 1994); loss and longing (Emoff 1998; Chavez 2017); the poetics of language as

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<sup>59</sup> Musicking, terminology attributed to Christopher Small ([1998] 2010), is meant to show that music is an action; it refers to any act related to musical performance, from performing, to listening, writing, etc.

it relates to song (Fox 2004); the poetics of identity (Krimms 2000) or hyperspecific focuses such as the poetics of violence and resistance in Israel/Palestine (McDonald 2013). Cheryl Keyes (2000) uses a variety of techniques including linguistic analysis from interviews with an “interpretive community” - practitioners, fans, critics - and lyrical analysis to reveal archetypes and a poetics of hip-hop that is specific to women, who are typically underrepresented within rap. Ethnomusicologist and philologist Panayotis League (2016) reveals the poetics of the *mantinádha*, a rhyming couplet in iambic decapentameter that is a dominant form among Kalymnian people residing in the Greek Aegean and among their diaspora in the US and Canada. The rhyming couplets are bound to a fixed length of 15 syllables, but these boundaries do not stifle the creativity of performers. League reveals a poetics of *meraklís* - knowing how to use oral poetry techniques in order to sing well - and the social discourses around what constitutes good and bad performance in *mantinádha*.

Approaching musical lyrics from the vantage point of poetry, Adam Bradley’s *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop* (2009) offers some valuable insights into the formal linguistic structures that often occur in the music. He skillfully analyzes lyrics, giving detailed attention to features such as syllables and wordplay, along with more classic literary devices like enjambment, assonance, and alliteration. These are very useful tools in understanding some ways that rap works through a poetic framework. When approaching his book as an ethnomusicologist who studies hip-hop, there are ways that his work must be slightly tweaked or expanded upon in order to be applied to the music - other than a deep focus on “bars” or the metrical structure upon which rappers fit their lyrics into a measured framework, his work does not always account for what would typically be considered musical analysis. While he does not have a background in a musical discipline, he seems to

almost eschew the notion that musical analysis is useful for rap, noting early in this book that rap is able to “unburden itself from the requirements of musical form” (2009: xvi). While this is perhaps a salient point on the level of lyrics alone, I argue that rap is one of the most bound-to-form musical genres, partially because of the dependence on bars that Bradley so painstakingly illuminates. The genre conventions of hip-hop and the poetics of rap in reference to song construction are so overbearing that very few emcees have rapped in metrical patterns *other* than four beats per measure. He notes that there is no need to disparage music or poetry for his mode of analysis and asserts that rap’s standing as music makes it all the more poetic, yet considers rhythm to be the only musical parameter worth serious consideration in rap. His idea of a poetics of hip-hop rests on his assertion that rap is essentially poetry. Within ethnomusicology, we must consider not only the music and musical form, but also the social context in which the musical artist penned the lyrics. Essentially, we must move from the assertion that all rap is just poetry to the realization that this type of poetic analysis is a useful tool to understanding just one of the essential elements of the poetics of hip-hop.

The lyrics in rap are quite dependent on the beats over which they are performed. This is not to say that acapella rap is an impossibility, or that lyrics lose meaning on the level of language without an attachment to a beat. But as Rob Walser (1995) showed in his work on the music of Public Enemy, beats are instrumental in granting rap its affective power in a way that lyrics alone cannot do. This point has been echoed in the work of Joseph Schloss (2000), Justin A. Williams (2010), Hanif Abdurraqib (2019), and others. Additionally, interviews I have watched or read, and interviews that I have conducted, suggest that the *sound* of a beat is overwhelmingly important to both producers and rappers. Divergent from

Bradley's, and many other scholars' focus on rhythm as the most important element of rap music, I argue that the rhythm Bradley identifies, the steadiness of the 4/4 found in the vast majority of beats against which rappers create their lyrics, is not necessarily any more important than the other elements contributing to the overall feel and affect of a track. The skeleton of kick and snare that underlie hip-hop beats can often be taken as a given - even beats that do not have percussion in them typically cycle in a way that implies rhythm.<sup>60</sup> Rhythm, as a basis of holistic analysis for rap, is mundane. Rappers look for many other features in beats that elicit an affective response. They realize the importance of the way a beat sounds - the chords, samples, sounds, feel, etc - to the success of their lyrics and the overall song. A beat that really speaks to a rapper is positioned to serve as the best vessel for the rapper's message to come across with the affective force that they desire, and this is likely to be heard and felt by the listener. When I asked the rapper Mic Write via text message what was most important to him when selecting a beat, he replied:

[the most important thing is] that it surprises me. I'm looking for something I didn't expect or otherwise so undeniable that I'm moved. May be a sample flip, may be a chord that's different, may be that drop<sup>61</sup> -- but whatever it is, I'm looking for that thing that stands up like 'hey I ain't like that other shit on this drive<sup>62</sup>'...cuz that's what pulls new schemes & rhymes & patterns outta me...& outta the listener, in my opinion. (Mic Write text message, Dec. 10, 2019)

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<sup>60</sup> Jay Electronica's series of "Eternal Sunshine" tracks (2012) or Nas's "Queens Get The Money" (2008) are good examples of this.

<sup>61</sup> The "drop" in a beat is the moment of released tension. Not all beats contain a drop. It is achieved through a variety of means, including moving from filtered to unfiltered sound, adding in bass when it was not previously a part of the beat, changing tempo, or adding in a formal, repetitive beat pattern after a frenetic build.

<sup>62</sup> The "drive" to which he refers is a thumb drive, other digital storage device, or cloud storage platform. It is common practice for producers and beatmakers to load multiple beats onto one of these storage devices and present them to emcees; the emcees listen to all of the tracks, deciding which appeal to them most.

In Mic Write's text response, the importance of elements beyond rhythm is evident. The presence of a regular 4/4 beat pattern, while likely an important factor, is also an expectation, so regular that a rapper would be unlikely to identify it as integral to their beat selection process. While lyrics are generally penned to a formal 4/4 structure, calling rhythm the most important element ignores the things a rapper may list as important to them. Mic identifies a number of elements essential to rap's affective success: sample flips, or the way that a producer reimagines source materials to create new, unexpected sonic textures and tapestries; chord selection, harmonically interesting soundscapes that inspire emcees in the crafting of their lyrics; a drop, or the way that a beat suddenly releases tension. Write says he's looking for beats that stand out and say "hey I ain't like that other shit on this drive," revealing that he is looking for the beats that separate themselves from others to his ear because of the elements he noted. It can be assumed that the vast majority, if not all, of the beats on a drive would share a common 4/4 rhythm. While that may seem like an argument for the importance of rhythm in the music - the fact that it is so ubiquitous that it is standard in the construction of beats - it is more or less like saying the most important thing about being alive is oxygen. At its core, that is indisputable; however, it is not the crux of what guides human life, nor is it a thing that people typically consider when thinking about their lives or their purpose. It can be assumed that the oxygen was there all along.

I contend that beyond rhythm, other elements of a beat, including harmonic and melodic interest, historical relevance, cultural significance, and affective response are what emcees are looking for, and therefore are *as* or *more* important. These various elements can be thought of as informing an aural poetics of hip-hop. As Mic Write states, it is things like creative sample flips and interesting harmonic structures that push his creativity and

determine how he crafts his lyrics. The various aesthetic choices made by a producer, beyond how a 4/4 beat is patterned and laid out with kick and snare, are integral to lyric writing and to the poetics of hip-hop in general. The affect of the music is reliant on the poetics noted by Bradley and others, but also by so much more. I am searching for a poetics of horrorcore that reflects the city through lyrics and their relational links to sound in the music of Detroit horrorcore artists like Esham, Insane Clown Posse, and King Gordy.

## **Horrorcore**

Horrorcore should be separated from its nearby forebear, gangsta rap. Gangsta rap has well-documented themes and tropes that are considered generic conventions. Many scholars have devoted their attention to the lyrical content of rap<sup>63</sup> for various sociopolitical reasons. In the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, Denise Herd (2009) sampled what *Billboard* and Gavin charts considered the most popular rap songs from 1979 to 1997, transcribing the lyrics of each track and coding them for references to violence. Herd uses this data to address the apparent trend upward to more violent lyrics, attributing it to two basic themes: media violence reflecting actual social trends (i.e. structural conditions, drug epidemic, etc.) or the literally violent lifestyles of the artists themselves. She notes that a contrasting theme, the industry working to actively promote violence in the music to drive sales, has also been taken up by some journalists and commentators. Herd calls for new media policies to decrease the prevalence of violent lyrics, and for media literacy campaigns that essentially teach impressionable youth to not be so impacted by violent lyrics; she also believes that a primary goal is working to decouple the idea that representations of violence are profitable. Using a similar methodology in *Sociological Forum*, Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews

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<sup>63</sup> Perhaps most notable is Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1993), which offered one of the first in-depth analyses of rap, with attention to topics like politics, misogyny, violence, race, police brutality, etc.

work to demonstrate the prevalence of homicide narratives in rap music. In concluding, they note that “much of the existing literature has argued that rap music serves as a vehicle for political expression and social change. It is difficult to argue that lyrical compositions involving the violent death of human beings have an ameliorative social effect, but homicide in rap lyrics can expose the tragic side of gangsta/inner-city life” (2009: 627). In the *Journal of Negro Education*, Jeanita Richardson and Kim Scott argue against the racist notions of rap and rappers (and Black people) as inherently violent, or as producers of violence, stating that rap is “a creative expression and metaphorical offspring of America's well-established culture of violence” (2002: 175). In *The Hip-Hop Wars* (2008), Tricia Rose argues that the poetics of gangsta rap, hip-hop’s most popular subgenre, define the way that young Black people view each other and the way that white people view Black people in the US. As alluded to previously, in his 1995 article “Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy,” Robert Walser pushes through the ubiquitous focus on lyrics to argue that the many musical aspects of rap, beyond lyrics, are what lend lyrics their affective power - a sentiment that I share. For all of these important analyses and critiques of violence in rap music, many of them cannot easily be mapped onto horrorcore, also known as *the wicket shit*, a rap subgenre that coheres due to its reliance on the abject.

## **The Wicket Shit**

In a 2016 interview with the Denver, Colorado, publication *Westword*, Detroit emcee and horrorcore pioneer Esham gives his basic definition of the ‘wicket shit’<sup>64</sup>, calling it a “particular type of music that we do, the acid rap...it’s a genre that dives into dark imagery

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<sup>64</sup> Esham purposely stylizes it as ‘wicket,’ with a ‘t’ and not a ‘d’. The cited interview, and many other interviews, mistakenly write it as ‘wicked’ when quoting him.

and really mental<sup>65</sup> subjects” (Archuleta 2016). He states that “a lot of kids choose to express themselves through this musical artform instead of violently at times, and this music originated in Detroit, Michigan.” The choice that he presents - making violent music instead of enacting physical violence - echoes tropes about hip-hop’s origins in late 70s, early 80s New York, wherein “inner city”<sup>66</sup> youth chose making hip-hop as a direct alternative to getting involved in street/gang life. Esham’s mention of “dark imagery and really mental subjects” is an indication of some of the genre’s primary goals. By all accounts, he was the first Detroit artist recording this style of rap. He does not consider himself responsible for the music’s origins, and has openly stated that he does not consider himself to be the “godfather of horrorcore” – a nickname bestowed upon him by consumers of the genre. Esham feels that he is someone who merely planted the seed, and he territorially marks the musical style as not bound to a specific person, but tied inextricably to place. Horrorcore, the wicket shit, in Esham’s formulation, is Detroit-born, and this personal distancing but geographic claim shows the importance of place to Esham. It is an important discursive choice, suggesting the constitutive relationship he sees between Detroit and the wicket shit, or horrorcore. Removing himself from the style’s origin but grounding it so heavily in Detroit reveals not only the significance of place in his formulation of horrorcore, but the formulations of Detroit artists who would soon follow, and the conceptions of horrorcore among contemporary Detroit artists. With

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<sup>65</sup> “Mental” has established connotations in rap, serving as both general slang for the mind, brain, and thinking, and as a gesture towards what is known as “conscious rap,” or rap that is believed to be about imparting knowledge and messages of self-empowerment for Black youth. In this instance, Esham means “unstable,” or “mentally ill.”

<sup>66</sup> A particularly inaccurate term that has somehow survived in popular discourse, “inner city” is a euphemism for Black, Brown, and poor. From a geographic standpoint, inner cities in the US are increasingly non-residential, and the existing residences are quite expensive, inaccessible to the people gestured towards by the term “inner city.”



“horrorcore” not coined as a genre name until the mid-90s, Esham referred to his style as “acid rap,” terminology that he still frequently uses. As he states in his *Westword* interview, he used this term because the lyrical themes “took people on a ride,” similar to the effects one would feel while under the influence of the hallucinogenic drug known as acid.

This was many moons ago, before anything like this ever existed...we didn't know what to call these rhymes that we were doing, and we were talking about some way-out-there stuff. We knew it was like doing lyrical LSD. Little did we know that while we were making these rhymes and making these records, the whole tripped-out way of recording music was about to be born. (Archuleta 2016)

“When we started doing these raps, the Internet was not out, and it was a lot harder to connect with people,” Esham says. “A lot of things people see today when we were putting images out there wasn't there at the time, but we live in a society that's desensitized to everything, so now we're having to shock people on a whole new level.” Honing in on what is still a central issue within horrorcore, he states, “sometimes we're so far ahead of time and space that we tend to speak on subjects for which people aren't ready, and we just have to let everybody catch up and just continue to make music and to celebrate the 'wicked (sp) shit.’”

While there does not appear to be scholarly writing dedicated to horrorcore as a whole, some of the artists who have songs that would be considered horrorcore have been the subject of articles, book chapters, and a large and growing amount of journalistic writing. Generally speaking, the music is analyzed through the lens of misogyny (Keller 2003; Stephens 2005; Adams and Fuller 2006; etc.) - understandably so, given the abundance of lyrics featuring misogynistic tropes and explicit physical violence or sexual

violence (often, but not always) toward women in the music. One article on the music of Tyler, the Creator keeps misogyny as its discursive basis while refocusing the gaze towards possible reasons for the artist to make those choices rather than focusing solely on how those choices reverberate in society. Penelope Eate (2013) argues that the frequent rape narratives in Tyler, the Creator's music - before 2013 - can be read as symptoms of a greater pathological resentment towards women in a post-cultural feminist landscape, and that writing and recording the lyrics might act as a kind of 'therapeutic' performativity wherein the artist attempts to curb patriarchal anxieties while revealing his deviant masculinity.<sup>67</sup> This shifting of gaze is useful when exploring the thematic material of horrorcore, which could easily be dismissed as immoral/misogynistic and given no further inquiry.

Scholarly writings on horror films are another useful resource with which to guide explorations of horrorcore, as horrorcore artists often cite horror films as musical inspiration,<sup>68</sup> even co-opting characters from popular horror films for use in lyrics and lyrical narratives. Horrorcore artists even portray themselves *as* popular horror movie characters or rap over beats that sample horror film scores and villain themes. In 1971, Dennis L. White sought to theorize how films produce horror, arguing that it is through a complex relationship between all parts working together to produce horrific feelings, such as the feeling of uncontrollable causation - knowing, for instance, that a monster is coming to kill you and you can do absolutely nothing to change the outcome. White

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<sup>67</sup> While not noted by Eate, Tyler, the Creator's sexual identity has been a frequent topic of discussion for much of his career, and this may also have factored into his projection of power and deviant masculinity.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Walser makes a similar correlation between horror film and heavy metal in *Running With The Devil* (2014).

argued that all of the film's elements had to work in conjunction to produce this feeling.

He uses the example of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, noting:

The murder sequences in *Psycho*, for example, do not represent the high point of the film's plot or the high water marks of its direction. The film is a composition in time; its purpose is much more than to establish a framework for these scenes. *Psycho* is not shot and edited to match these highly stylized sequences. They are startling, but not out of place, because they are part of the total composition and are linked in a network of causes and effects with each part of the film. If a film is to frighten us it must use elements that are genuinely frightening: in the case of *Psycho*, not just an old dark house, but the madness of a man like Norman who lives in that house - not just murder, but the kind of death from which there is no protection, no warning, and no escape. (1971: 7)

Additionally, scholars have noted that horror films, much like other forms of art, serve as important vehicles for the expression and articulation of contemporary fears and anxieties.

Noel Carroll (1981) discusses horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s as being reflective of general feelings of powerlessness and anxiety related to inflation, recession, and the Cold War. Dwight Cochrane (2014) writes about the *Frankenstein* (1931) franchise and other horror films of that era, showing that fears of polio were essentially magnified by the films, leading to the films actually working in service of public health initiatives. In similar ways, music is often afforded the status of being reflective of its time, cultural context, and social surroundings.

Whereas the themes in gangsta rap have been written about and can be thought of as reflections of - or progenitors of - violent realities in the inner city, I argue horrorcore cannot be thought of so easily in these terms because it cannot cohere outside of these horrific themes. The themes in horrorcore are grotesque beyond the point of violence, often to the

point of parody. While homicide is a regular theme in rap, particularly in gangsta rap, within horrorcore, these themes are taken to excess. Common topics include abortion, gore, sexual violence, necrophilia, and devil worship/Satanism. Narratives of sexual violence do occur in mainstream hip-hop and gangsta rap, but in horrorcore, they are regular to the point of banality. Horrorcore dwells in the abject, and it elicits such strong responses because of its overwhelmingly grotesque lyrical themes weighed against cultural ideas of social acceptability, typically coupled with beats meant to sound menacing and dark either through dissonant harmonies, distorted soundscapes, or samples that already resonate as dark or horrific due to various preexisting cultural or historic associations with said samples. It is the coalescence of sound and lyrics that forms a feeling of abjection and informs a poetics of horrorcore.

As previously mentioned, horrorcore is a rap subgenre with contested origins. Some place its beginnings in the music of Houston artists Geto Boys and Ganksta NIP (who penned the lyrics for the Geto Boys song “Chuckie” from 1991). The Geto Boys received national acclaim with their 1991 single “Mind Playing Tricks On Me,” which contained themes of paranoia, hallucination, suicide, deteriorating mental health, and graphic violence. The group recorded songs that would be considered far more horrific and fit more categorically into what is considered horrorcore. In their 1990 song “Assassins,” group member Johnny C raps over a beat that features gunshots, a sound clip of a man shouting “don’t fuck with me!,” and a synthesized cowbell from a Roland 808 drum machine.

I dug between the chair, and whipped out the machete  
She screamed, I sliced her up until her guts were like spaghetti  
A maniac, I stabbed the girl in her tits  
And to stop her nerves from jumpin’ I just cut her to bits

This short segment demonstrates the typical aesthetic of horrorcore music - a beat that explicitly makes use of violent sounds (in this case, gunshots and a man shouting a threatening warning) coupled with lyrics that thematically read like the confessions of the most deranged serial killer. The sensationalized violence was different from typical gangsta rap narratives of violence popular at the time that focused primarily on gang homicide and featured misogynistic lyrics that stopped short of murder. Other origin stories look to New York groups like the Gravediggaz or the Flatlinerz, the latter of which is sometimes credited with coining the term “horrorcore,” a portmanteau of hardcore rap and horror. Music videos for songs from the Flatlinerz 1994 album *U.S.A. (Under Satan’s Authority)*, featured group members eating entrails, nailed to a cross, and rapping while hanging from a noose;<sup>69</sup> at the time, the controversy attending their work kept them from receiving much airtime. Many place the foundation of horrorcore in the sounds of Detroit rapper Esham and his 1989 debut album *Boomin’ Words From Hell*, though it did not bear its genre name until five years later.

## A Poetics of Horrorcore

Midnight's the Witches Hour  
And you're outside  
Somebody played the Reel Life Product tape  
And committed suicide  
Trying to save your soul, it can't be done  
Unholy to the son of Satan, I ain't the one  
Congratulations, brothers and sisters who prayed for me  
Some slayed for me and still pray for me  
I made a rhyme Satanic, it'll make you vomit  
And I think I'm the shit  
When it comes down to it

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<sup>69</sup> This imagery is also implied in the music video for Tyler The Creator’s “Yonkers” (2011). Tyler and his former rap crew, known as Odd Future, have been considered horrorcore rappers by some due to some of their lyrics. They do not consider themselves horrorcore artists.

You knew it and know it  
Satan's poet, your mind I'll blow it

Esham, "Some Old Wicket Shit!!!," *Boomin' Words From Hell* (1989)

Esham's *Boomin' Words From Hell* featured a tracklist with entirely self-produced beats; only 16 years old at the time of the album's release, he also recorded all of the tracks in a single day. Esham refers to his style of music as "acid rap" and coined the term "wicket shit" to describe the sonic and lyrical themes in his music - the term "wicket shit" has since been used by other rappers under the horrorcore umbrella to describe their lyrical style. *Boomin' Words From Hell* featured heavy metal musical influences and dark lyrical themes on tracks like "Some Old Wicket Shit!!!" and "Amen Another Sin." In a 2008 interview for Detroit's *Metro Times*, Esham states that Hell on his record referred to the streets of Detroit. He notes, "It was the crack era, when I made *Boomin'*, and that's where all that really came from...It was all an expression about ['70s-'80s drug cartel] Young Boys Incorporated, Mayor Coleman Young, the city we lived in and just the turmoil that our city was going through at the time" (Ketchum III 2008). His boomin' words from Hell are powerful words proliferating out from the Hell of Detroit, his lyrical horrorscape inextricably linked to place. This formulation of Detroit as Hell informed Esham's lyrical themes of Satan/Satanism, violence, evil, etc. Also known as Esham the Unholy, his common themes formed the beginning of a Detroit horrorcore lexicon still in use in contemporary horrorcore. On the *Boomin'* track "Devil's Groove," the beat to which features an intermittent replaying of John Carpenter's theme music from the popular horror film *Halloween*, Esham raps:

Sacrifice your life tonight with a knife  
Pray to Hell and give the Devil your life  
See many of you motherfuckers don't understand it, see  
How long can you listen to one man's insanity?  
Prophecy: the dead has arose and  
The Devil is dead and one man is chosen

To be the dead, to kill, bloodshed  
So much bloodshed it painted the town red

Satanic themes were, and still are, highly uncommon in mainstream hip-hop, but have become a staple of the horrorcore genre. While homicide was becoming the topic du jour in late 80s and early 90s hardcore hip-hop, or gangsta rap, Esham rapped about homicide in a different, more self-indulgent way; Esham's themes of homicide are not retaliatory in nature, but premeditated. He also calls for ritual suicide in this track, and suicide is a frequent topic throughout the album, with one track on a reprint of the album being titled "4 All The Suicidalists." This track, along with others on the album, lays out violent, twisted acts in explicit detail. While it is conjecture to posit who may have started the horrorcore genre, it is clear that Esham began Detroit's horrorcore scene, influencing artists such as Eminem, Insane Clown Posse, King Gordy, and Bizarre. Esham's formulation of Detroit as Hell is echoed throughout the music of Detroit horrorcore artists, who use both the decaying conditions of parts of the city and the media representations that fixate on these conditions as lyrical inspiration. Acclaimed author and music journalist Dan Sicko notes that horrorcore is "an extreme, almost parodied" interpretation of life in the city, linked to urban decay and decline. Sicko states that "both the horrorcore of hip-hop outfits such as Insane Clown Posse, Esham and (to a lesser extent) the multi-platinum selling Eminem utilize shocking and blatantly over-the-top narratives to give an over-exaggerated, almost cartoon-like version of urban deprivation in Detroit" (cited in Cohen and Strachan 2005). The horrific, monstrous projections of self and of Detroit are the main source of cultural capital within horrorcore in the city and inform a poetics of the subgenre centered around abject lyrical narratives and soundscapes meant to contribute to an overall sense of horror through various means including distortion, dissonance, or direct reference to horror film. I will begin to illuminate a

poetics of horrorcore in Detroit by touching on examples from various artists from the scene, then focusing on the music of King Gordy, the self-proclaimed “King of Horrorcore” whose songs are an example of abjection taken to its extreme, the most derelict example of Detroit horrorcore.

As Esham is the common musical influence shared by Detroit horrorcore artists, an analysis of his lyrics can reveal some of the subgenre’s common themes. Analyzing the lyrics of Esham’s debut album *Boomin’ Words From Hell* (1989) along with his subsequent albums *Judgement Day* (1992) and *KKKill The Fetus* (1993) illuminates Esham’s most commonly-visited topics, which became the blueprint for all of the wicket shit that would follow: Satan/The Devil/Sacrilege; Gore/Abject Violence; Sexual Violence/Abject Misogyny; Suicide; Mental Illness. Of the 70 tracks analyzed:

44 referenced or were explicitly about Satan, Devil Worship, Antichrist, Heresy.

30 referenced or were explicitly about gore or abject violence.<sup>70</sup>

28 referenced or were explicitly about sexual violence/misogyny.

22 referenced or were explicitly about suicide.

17 referenced or were explicitly about mental illness/psychosis.

This analytical method requires generalization. For instance, taboo topics such as abortion/infanticide or cannibalism are specifically referenced in three songs each, which was not a high enough number of mentions to be considered commonly-visited, but is still something worth noting due to the atypical mentioning of these subjects in rap lyrics.

Additionally, the umbrella of sexual violence covers topics ranging from rape to pedophilia

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<sup>70</sup> As Kristeva notes on abjection, it is sinister, scheming, shady, premeditated. Abject violence, then, is different from much of the violence featured in rap lyrics, which skews towards retaliation/image defense. Abject violence is violence for pleasure/fun/shock.



to incest - each shocking in their own right. It is important to note that rapping about sex in this way is atypical to mainstream hip-hop - while the ways in which sex is mentioned in mainstream hip-hop are often problematic, artists have danced around the topic of sexual assault rather than explicitly portraying it in their music. These general themes laid the foundation for genre convention, as evinced through the following lyrical examples from Detroit horrorcore rappers past and present.

### **On Satan/Hereticism**

There's several different levels to Devil worshipping  
Horses' heads, human sacrifices, cannibalism, candles and exorcism  
Animals, havin' sex with 'em  
Camels, mammals and rabbits  
But I don't get into that, I kicked the habit  
I just beat you to death  
With weapons that eat through the flesh  
And I never eat you unless the fuckin' meat looks fresh  
-Eminem, on Notorious B.I.G. "Dead Wrong," *Born Again* (1999)

Fuck it, why not be Jesus' bitch, he's the shit  
He'll forgive you for your sins, shit, he'll even suck your dick  
-King Gordy, "Jesus Christ's Mistress," *Jesus Christ's Mistress* (2011)

### **On Gore/Abject Violence**

I stab people, 4, 5 people everyday  
I tried to see a shrink to stop that shit but it ain't no fucking way  
I stabbed him, stabbed his nurse and his fucking cat  
Stabbed them! Stabbed them all like that  
-Insane Clown Posse, "I Stab People," *The Amazing Jeckel Brothers* (1999)

Me and Marcus Allen went over to see Nicole  
When we heard a knock at the door, must've been Ron Gold  
Jumped behind the door, put the orgy on hold  
Killed them both, then smeared blood on the white Bronco  
-Eminem, "Role Model," *The Slim Shady LP* (1999)

But I'm an old-fashioned guy  
Gotta get them teeth and both them eyes  
Cut off the hands and watch them die  
Look 'em in the eye and say "goodbye"

-Twiztid, "Kill Somebody," *The Continuous Eviltion of Life's ?'s* (2017)

The baby's premature  
The mother is a whore  
Contemplatin suicide, so what you waitin for?  
I think I heard it kicking, but that's a normal state  
Jam a hanger in ya asshole until your water breaks  
-Esham, "KKKill The Fetus," *KKKill The Fetus* (1993)

## Sexual Violence

Damn, I heard Twitter banned this guy  
His name's Vader  
He raps about fucking babies after they die  
He's Vader  
They say he'll make Lucifer cry  
His name's Vader  
Hail Dark Lord Vader  
He likes to rape transsexuals and fags  
He stuffs his butts with methane that gas  
Man'll even fuck Jesus in the ass  
Vader, Hail dark lord Vader  
-King Gordy, "Vader," *Hail Dark Lord Vader* (2012)

I fucked my cousin in his asshole, slit my mother's throat  
Guess who Slim Shady just signed to Interscope  
My little sister's birthday, she'll remember me  
For a gift I had ten of my boys take her virginity  
And bitches know me as a horny-ass freak  
Their mother wasn't raped, I ate her pussy while she was sleep  
Pissy-drunk, throwin' up in the urinal  
(*You fuckin' homo!*) That's what I said at my dad's funeral  
-Bizarre on Eminem "Amityville," *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000)

That's my kind of vibe, what else should I try, Lester?  
Drop-kick the bitch before her second trimester  
Perform the home abortion with Dexter, then I guess I'll  
Dig her fetus out with a wire hanger, then digest her  
-Eminem, "Medicine Ball," *Relapse* (2009)

## Suicide

I'm butt naked, I been jackin' off gettin' drunk  
It's my last hours alive, who gives a fuck? (Me)  
It don't matter, I'm doin' this shit in the garage

Tryin' to make it easier for them to clean my head splaage  
This bitch I loved, I hope she finds me  
Still up in the chair with my thoughts behind me  
-Insane Clown Posse, "Suicide Hotline," *The Wraith: Hell's Pit* (2004)

Additionally, one of Eminem's most famous songs, "Stan" (2000), is about an obsessed fan whose mental health issues and seemingly-unrequited desire for friendship with his favorite artist (Eminem) drive him to commit murder-suicide. Oddly enough 'stan' has entered pop culture vernacular, both as a noun for fans who support a particular artist to an unreasonable, unwavering degree regardless of the artist's actions, and as a verb for the act of supporting someone, something, someplace, etc.

### **Mental Illness**

I'm twisted like a psychopath, I write my rhymes in blood  
I don't got a DJ cause I a-cut him up  
-Esham, "Chemical Imbalance," *Tongues* (2001)

I'm like Spielberg with ill words and hoes on the curb  
Got a screw loose, I'm cuckoo, mentally disturbed  
-Danny Brown, "Lost," *Atrocity Exhibition* (2016)

A number of performer names allude to this theme: Insane Clown Posse, Twiztid, Bizarre. Additionally, ICP, Twiztid, Esham, and others have been associated with a label founded by Insane Clown Posse in 1989 - Psychopathic Records. The company logo features the silhouette of a man running with a meat cleaver – presumably to use it. All of the themes connect to artists' exaggerated, excessive interpretations of a decayed, unraveled Detroit, a city historically plagued by violence and other horrors. Yet beyond depictions of a violent city, the themes employed by emcees represent transformations of the artists themselves from merely death-bound-subjects (JanMohamed 2005) into monstrous beings, responsible for causing the havoc, death, and unending violence that the city would enact upon them. As the death-bound-subject is produced as subject through the constant threat of death, to *be* the

source of that death, even symbolically or discursively, is to both take control of one's subjectivity and to have the ability to turn others into death-bound-subjects. In a sense, these lyrical themes allow the artists to become the city itself.

Rhetorically, using poor, violent living conditions as inspiration for lyrics is typical for rap and other genres.<sup>71</sup> Yet it is difficult to place the specific themes used in Detroit horrorcore within the context of a larger hip-hop tradition, due to their irreducibly vile nature - horrorcore seems to stand alone. The themes seem to deliberately tap into feelings of disgust that Julia Kristeva would consider the abject, the Other that we repress in order to define ourselves as subject (1980). Rap's listeners participate in the music for a number of identity-forming and -reifying reasons, the most cited being an identification with "street culture" and criminal activity (Rose 1993; Kubrin 2005; Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley 2009; etc.). It is now understood that the majority of rap's consumers are white, and the ubiquitous socioculturally specific tales of homicide, incarceration, drug trafficking, and the like cannot map so easily onto their lives. But the same can also be said for some listeners of color, as not everyone lives the same life of struggle. People listen for entertainment, or aspirationally, feeling affective power from the stories of struggle and triumph heard in the music. Based on laws, social norms, and cultural ideas of acceptability that these laws and norms help to create, it would seem that listeners would not and could not identify with the themes in horrorcore<sup>72</sup> unless they are deviant subjects, already living outside of social normality. But as Rob Walser notes in his study of gender and affective power in heavy metal, "glorification of violence in American society is hardly deviant" (2014: 140), with violence and struggles

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<sup>71</sup> It is also typical for genres like blues, country, and rock.

<sup>72</sup> Or any of the aforementioned genres, for that matter. The overwhelming vast majority of listeners who engage with violently-themed music across genres from opera to ska do not do so because they plan to or have committed acts of violence.

for power permeating multiple facets of society from advertising, to sporting events, to self-help books, to the military language used to sell supposedly benevolent political programs, like the “War on Poverty” or the “War on Drugs” (ibid). Additionally, “music does not simply inflict its meanings upon helpless fans; texts become popular when people find them meaningful in the contexts of their own lives” (2014: 150), and Roland Barthes famously demonstrated that all texts contain multiple meanings and endless interpretations (1977), confirming that listeners have autonomy and could derive multiple affective meanings from the music. The use of “insanity” as a common theme may provide an escape hatch for much of the behavior outlined in the other themes prevalent in the music. Being mentally unwell is viewed as dangerous due to its Otherness but also serves as a buffer, an excuse for the characters committing the unspeakable acts common in horrorcore lyrics. It is a concession that a “normal” person would never find pleasure in such activities, only someone who is sick. Without being dismissive of the truly intense lyrical examples provided, the vast majority of horrorcore artists would explain their lyrical choices by noting that they were made for shock value and entertainment, but also that their choices are not all that shocking. Recall the interview with King Gordy from the beginning of this chapter:

**Jon:** I kinda had wondered with your lyrics kinda being as outrageous and all that as they are to a lot of people who aren’t into the genre, is there a line for you? Like do you have a line where even you are like “damn that’s too much I can’t fucking say that.”

**King Gordy:** No, because everything that I’ve ever really said, I’ve seen in the news.

**J:** That’s a good point, that is true.

**KG:** But you know what, that’s funny to me. People will go on the internet, [watch] the news, and they’ll see all this shocking stuff...but when I say it they just get so offended, that’s weird to me.

The ubiquity of shocking media likely leads artists to up the ante of how grotesque they can be, and indeed *must* be, to produce listener disgust. There is an obvious market for hypergraphic lyrics – while some artists like King Gordy may be considered more underground (though he has amassed a large following among those who consider themselves horrorcore fans), other Detroit horrorcore artists like Insane Clown Posse regularly sell out arenas, have three gold records and two platinum records, and host a very well-attended annual festival known as Gathering of the Juggalos,<sup>73</sup> all while spitting their murder-laced lyrics. I believe that these choices are heavily influenced by life in Detroit, where things that should be read as socially alarming are so quotidian that they are viewed as inconsequential. Perhaps, obliquely, horrorcore is a critique of everyday violence. In other ways, when living in a violent, disempowering situation, any assertion of power can be viewed as a triumph (Levine 1977), no matter how violent. Though they rely upon exaggeration, excess, and spectacle, horrorcore artists can be heard as resistant to a culture of spectacle that has rendered the horrors of their city ineffective, and therefore ignored.

### **Detroit as Horrorscape**

Many Rust Belt cities have been discussed in pessimistic, unflattering ways, some even in direct reference to the Motor City,<sup>74</sup> but none have been forced to endure as morbid a gaze - from both residents and outsiders - as Detroit. Peter Eisinger's 2013 article in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* rhetorically asks if Detroit is dead, the author having already made up his mind that it is. In his conclusion, he writes:

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<sup>73</sup> Devoted fans of Insane Clown Posse are known as “juggalos” and “juggalettes.”

<sup>74</sup> Comedian Mike Polk, Jr. became a viral sensation for his series of “Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Video[s]” on YouTube which featured songs sarcastically lauding the various signs of economic decline in the city, wrapped up with the tagline “At Least We’re Not Detroit.”

At some point these places stop being what we call cities. Urban death involves the withering or failure of crucial urban functions involving governance and economic opportunity, as well as the diminution of lesser functions such as cultural preservation and the provision of public spaces. The fulfillment of these is why people want to come together in dense concentrations; it is what makes a large place not simply a collection of many people, like a refugee camp, but rather a city, an urban place. It is quickly becoming hard to call Detroit a living city anymore. (2013: 9)

In his formulation, Eisinger nods toward a failing of civic functions and a lack of job opportunities as evidence of “urban death,” but it is important to note that the failures of these “crucial urban functions” was by no means a coincidental or passive occurrence. As I have already noted, decades of deindustrialization, economic policies that incentivized large corporations to move production out of the city, a deliberate lack of investment in predominantly Black neighborhoods (or the bulldozing of Black neighborhoods), and other detrimental social and economic policies have led Detroit to a state of what Nestor Garcia-Canclini would call “calculated ungovernability” (Garcia Canclini 1995; Kun and Montezemolo 2012). In other words, not only has the decline of many of Detroit’s neighborhoods been allowed – it has been planned. Journalist Charlie LeDuff treats his hometown’s death as *fait accompli* in his book *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013). In this *New York Times* bestseller, LeDuff plays coroner as he sets out to discover the cause of the city’s demise. Urbanist and Wayne State University professor George Galster refers to Detroit as a “suicidal metropolis, a place where bodies, psyches, and opportunities die all too often” (2012: 280), echoing a sentiment held by many that Detroit and death are intertwined - and implying that Detroit is responsible for its own demise. Galster also refers to fears and allegations over spatial disenfranchisement as accusations of “space rape” (2012: 256), giving a problematic label to common anxieties over urban space and place. Even accounts

that are intended to be optimistic have a tendency to take the city's death as a foregone conclusion, speaking of afterlives (Binelli 2012). Ironically, the motto on the Detroit city flag is *Resurget Cineribus*, Latin for "it will rise from the ashes." This motto refers to a disastrous fire that destroyed all but one building in Detroit in 1805, but contemporary conditions of the city have led to a resurgent focus on the seemingly prescient phrase.

The aforementioned books and articles were written during arguably Detroit's lowest financial point, the period just before The Grand Bargain that kicked off the city's currently ongoing period of revitalization.<sup>76</sup> But there is still an abundance of decay and disarray in the city, and many ruins yet remain; the evidence of decades of neglect and a 60% population loss are impossible to erase overnight. Over the course of my fieldwork in Detroit, I witnessed all phases of the city's topography, from the most dilapidated homes to the shiniest new food halls constructed from shipping containers to give off an air of charming, do-it-yourself spirit. Sometimes spaces like these are directly next to each other. Regardless of the state of gentrification in whichever corner of Detroit one happens to be, the city continues to carry narratives of death, decay, and horror due to a long historical association with all three. Consultants to my research reaffirmed these narratives in various ways. My interviews with DJ Stacye J revealed an almost nostalgic pining for past dangers. As we sat in a Midtown bar and restaurant called The Block during the Fall of 2017, she reminisced about what the surrounding area was like less than a decade prior, noting "I can't believe this is the Cass Corridor now! You used to not come down here unless you were tryna get mugged...now there's moms pushing strollers and shit!" While she is clearly not wishing violence on women and their children, there is a sense of disbelief in Stacye's answer. I heard similar

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<sup>76</sup> See Chapter One.



sentiments from other consultants when meeting in more gentrified parts of town, a shared remembering of past horrors enacted on now safe city blocks. There is an often-unspoken bitterness in these responses, incredulity at the fact that they grew up through and lived with multiple forms of violence that the city is now interested in quelling, due to capitalistic financial investment. It is as if the longtime residents of Detroit were not worth protecting, like they were just meant to live through various forms of violence. Other consultants presented me with cautionary tales about how to live safely in the city: don't go to a gas station at night, definitely not by yourself; "keep your head on a swivel;"<sup>77</sup> "don't go over there if you ain't from over there" in reference to a number of specific areas notorious for street violence including a neighborhood known as Delray and the deceptively-named Joy Road. These cautions pointed to the fact that danger remained in Detroit, despite revitalization efforts.

Yet contemporary life in Detroit reveals a resilient attitude among longtime residents, a shared understanding of the strength gained by living through such violence and horrors. Like Mic Write's sentiment shown through his lyric "coughin' from the coffin, we still alive!" (2015), my consultants reaffirmed their power gained from living and thriving in a city written off as dead. Many Detroit hip-hop artists use the city's horrors for aesthetic purposes, from using collapsed buildings as backdrop in music video shoots, to using the perceived common sounds of gunfire and police sirens in beats, to drawing upon tales from the street - real and imagined - to create narrative lyrical arcs in their songs.

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<sup>77</sup> Essentially, make sure you remain constantly aware of your surroundings, look behind you frequently, etc. Don't get "caught slipping," or being unprepared for a possible altercation. While I have heard this phrase in other places outside of Detroit, and it has been used within hip-hop, I seemed to hear it a lot in Detroit.

King Gordy uses Detroit's horrors as inspiration, but he is more aligned with the various authors, journalists, academics who have discussed Detroit in horrific terms than with hip-hop artists who use the backdrop of Detroit to reaffirm their tenacity. However, his music uses horror to critique the sensationalization of violence in the city. When King Gordy asserts that he is not rapping about anything that hasn't been in the news, and reiterates that he makes art that is supposed to be shocking, I cannot help but think about the autopsic views espoused by various journalists and authors to present Detroit as suicidal, anxious, and ultimately dead. Horror relies on a heightening and subsequent overloading or disorientation of the senses coupled with a loss of control or lack of predictability. King Gordy, through the use of horrific lyrical images coupled with sounds that carry cultural meaning as disturbing or otherwise abnormal and horrifying, is constantly upping his level of horror in an attempt to stay shocking in a world where the frequency of brutal acts desensitizes people to their brutality. While he is not always directly rapping about the city, his lyrics can be taken as an exaggerated commentary on the way that people gaze upon Detroit and the way that people generally view horror. Such levels of urban decay should be seen as atrocious, yet the city has become an internationally famous playground for "urban explorers" and those seeking ruin porn. Beyond being unmoved by acts of horror, or the various violences enacted upon the city, people seem to be *aroused* by them, hence the term "ruin porn." In deliberately drawing attention to disturbing topics, King Gordy is not only joining an ongoing discourse on the state of the city, he is going a step further and offering a reminder that Detroit's state is, in fact, *supposed* to be shocking, not looked upon with a voyeuristic gaze by those who fetishize "ruin porn."

### **"Always Saying Wild Shit"**

I'm an Afro-American man with a massive tear in his pants  
Should've wore some underwear in advance, but at least you get to stare at my ass  
**-King Gordy, "Put It Out" (2016)**

It was an uncharacteristically sunny day in February 2018 when I drove to River Rouge, a small city bordering Detroit - about 15 minutes south of downtown in an area known as Downriver.<sup>78</sup> The population is fairly diverse along racial lines and, though it has historically been a blue collar city, there has been a massive influx of white collar workers, primarily people who work in Detroit and have realized that they can afford to own homes Downriver and have access to more suburban things that Detroit does not offer like "big box" stores and multiplex movie theaters. I was heading to the home of rapper/producer Foul Mouth, an artist whose beats I'd heard in a number of recent projects. He'd instructed me to park on the street, enter through the fence into the backyard, then come around and knock on the backdoor. I was less than enthusiastic about the prospect of potentially trespassing and inspiring an overly-dramatic response from the wrong neighbor, so I texted him and got him to meet me at the fence.

We walked down cement stairs to the back door of the split-level home, then down more stairs into a dank, cigarette smoke-scented basement cluttered with records, various sound equipment and musical instruments, and old, dingy, pet hair-covered furniture. Foul Mouth and his collaborators and friends refer to this basement as The Snake Pit. This was a well-loved, lived-in space. The focal point was the workstation, with its large monitor and CPU, KRK speakers, mixers, pre-amps, headphones - all typical producer equipment. I settled into a chair, resigned to my animal hair-covered fate.

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<sup>78</sup> River Rouge, along with cities like Taylor, Ecorse, Wyandotte, and a dozen others are collectively referred to as "Downriver," a nickname referring to their geographic location in reference to Detroit, southbound along the Detroit River.

**Foul Mouth:** So you want like...my origin story and all that shit?

**Me:** We don't have to do all that, I don't really want info I can just look up online. I just want to chop<sup>79</sup> with you and see your process and all that.

**FM:** Ok sure, yeah I heard you were writing a book about Detroit hip-hop.

**Me:** Eventually, yeah.

After about a half-hour of talking and listening to beats, I asked him about a specific project that he'd produced, a 2016 collaborative project between Detroit rappers Bang Belushi and King Gordy titled *Herojuana*. The EP is an homage to marijuana (titled after a specific marijuana strain), and was put together over the course of 7 hours on a Sunday in August of 2016.

**Me:** That "Put It Out" joint is so fire!

**FM:** \*laughs\* Yeah man, that joint was funny to put together.

**Me:** Yeah, can you tell me about that process?

**FM:** Well they brought a ton of weed to the pit and were passing shit around. We were talking about some kid that had brought this janky ass reggie<sup>80</sup> this one time and Bango was just like "Man, put it out!" And they just kinda improvised the hook based off that.

**Me:** So some good came out of some bad weed.

We listened to a few songs off of the project and I found my interest in the artists had once again been piqued, especially now that I had a chance to speak with a producer who had worked with them. We talked about Bang Belushi, 1/4 of the legendary Fat Killahz (along with King Gordy, Marvwon, and Fatt Father), so named because of their stature and their

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<sup>79</sup> In the context of hip-hop production, 'chop' can refer to cutting and rearranging samples from records. In this particular context, I was using it as slang for having a casual conversation.

<sup>80</sup> Slang for 'regular,' common, low-quality marijuana, subpar to the many types that are available.

rhyme skill. But the conversation changed when I brought up King Gordy, who has a well-known reputation for the obscene.

**Me:** Man, what's up with Gordy?

**FM:** Gordy's crazy, man. Just crazy.

**Me:** Didn't he get banned from Twitter again for saying some wild shit?

**FM:** Man, who knows? He's always saying wild shit.

**Me:** Yeah, that's kind of his thing, right?

**FM:** Yeah, he's just being funny, shit ain't serious like that.

Similar to horrorcore artists oft-used themes of insanity, Foul Mouth distinguishes King Gordy as “crazy,” both explaining - perhaps excusing - how an artist could create such disturbing content, and distancing himself from the lyrical themes even though he has provided the beats for and produced a number of King Gordy's songs. While King Gordy has made his stance on making art clear in multiple interviews, I remarked that his repeated social media bans were evidence that there were obviously people out there who didn't find much humor in lyrics about sodomizing Jesus.

## **Hail Dark Lord Vader**

In this section, I return to the theme of poetics through a shift to musical analysis of King Gordy's music, demonstrating the relationality between lyrics and sounds and how they work in conjunction to create the affect of horror in the listener. Referring back to Alex Chavez's use of “aural poetics” to refer to the “dialogic interplay between embodiment and aesthetics” (2017: 7), I analyze both sound and lyric to reveal how this interplay takes place. The feelings of horror King Gordy seeks to create cannot be achieved simply through words or

our internalized feelings toward abjection; the music relies on the poetics of horrorcore, the interplay between abject lyrics and sounds that carry strong cultural associations with horror and violence. King Gordy's use of Darth Vader, one of the most recognizable villains in the history of film, aids in his goal to create shocking art, due to strong cultural associations with the character as a troubled, tragic character who may be capable of good, but is known for committing large, unspeakable acts of horror. This musical analysis reveals a typical way in which an artist, inspired by the everyday horrors of their city, might offer a critique of people's ambivalence towards those horrors by creating their own.

All I see is murder, murder my mindstate  
Preoccupied with homicide, trying to survive in this crime rate  
You are listening to a violent felon  
So say 'hi' to Mr. Kill Yo Ass, Mr. 187  
-King Gordy, "Mr. 187"

"Mr. 187," a track from King Gordy's 2009 album *King of Horrorcore, Vol. 2*, is narrated from a first person point-of-view, with Gordy presenting himself as the story's vile antagonist who is simultaneously trying to stay alive in a violent city. As Richard Wolf notes, the very association or dissociation with various social categories in which subjects participate is an engagement in social poetics that can deform the very social categories being engaged (2006: 249). To that end, King Gordy's lyric embodiment of a "violent felon" can be interpreted not only as an engagement in the poetics of horrorcore, but as a deformation of the idea of subjectivity in the city. His character is formed through a violent city and relies on creating more violence to navigate it. Mr. 187's offenses are wide-ranging and shocking: murder, cannibalism, pedophilia, sexual assault, necrophilia, and defilement all make appearances in the first verse of this song that is lyrically self-described as "sick porn." "Mr. 187" is one of many King Gordy songs wherein he intertwines themes of the dying city with

themes of abjection and the grotesque to create an overall image of Detroit as horrorscape, a city that is actualized through horror.

The album cover for King Gordy's 2012 project *Hail Dark Lord Vader* features an image of Darth Vader - the most infamous antagonist from the internationally-popular *Star Wars* film series. He stands proudly with arms crossed in the foreground; in the background behind him is a sea of enraptured fans, with hands in the air and voices raised, not unlike one would find in the crowd of a rock concert. Upon further inspection, the fans are monstrous - their faces are fleshless while their limbs are not, and they present as part animated skeleton, part flesh and blood human. Darth Vader also appears to be a bit different than normal: from the top of his helmet protrude braids fashioned to resemble devil horns; atop his mask rest novelty sunglasses with eyepieces that are shaped like marijuana leaves. His forearms are each emblazoned with the image of a street sign: on his right, Van Dyke; on his left, Harper. King Gordy *is* Darth Vader, and the cover represents him presiding over his domain, the city of Detroit, from his home base of Van Dyke and Harper, and neighborhood area on Detroit's East Side. The bottom right of the cover is stamped with a well-earned Parental Advisory Label, and the left bears a stamp of Gordy's own, following his repeated bans from social media platforms: "F@#K TWITTER." In presenting himself as Darth Vader, or Dark Lord Vader in his stylization, King Gordy is both aligning himself with evil through association with a supervillain and distancing himself from his own lyrical content by presenting it as the inside of a mind that is not his own. It is a move that allows him to exist in a liminal space between fantasized horror and the everyday abject of life in a dying Detroit. King Gordy creates art out of this liminal space.

The eponymous track “HDLV Intro,” from King Gordy’s 2012 project *Hail Dark Lord Vader* offers some insight into how the combination of lyrics and beat can contribute to a poetics of horrorcore, and to a depiction of the city/urban space as horrorscape. The “Imperial March” from the film *Star Wars*, composed by John Williams, serves as the primary source material sampled for the construction of the beat. In the US, and likely in many places across the world, there is already an overwhelming association between the “Imperial March” and evil, due to its presence as the main theme for Darth Vader and the Empire, a protofascist regime hell-bent on maintaining a totalitarian sense of order throughout the entire galaxy. This intertextuality is integral in this song’s creation of affect, and also alludes to an overarching poetics of horrorcore that moves beyond lyrics to include sound. Hearing the familiar melody invokes visions of Darth Vader, played by Dave Prowse but voiced by James Earl Jones, telepathically choking a subordinate or commanding his troops to destroy an entire planet with his ship’s powerful laser.

The song begins *as* John Williams’s “Imperial March,” with no tempo, timbre, key, or rhythmic alterations. After its four-measure introduction of strings, concert snare and cymbal crash on beat 4, the brass enter with the well-known melody. It is not until the eighth measure of the melody, the 12th measure of the song overall, that changes happen. The melody is met with a severe, oozing plunge in tempo and pitch,<sup>81</sup> giving the impression that things are coming to an abrupt, uncomfortable end. As this drop continues, the sound of static is heard, suggesting that one is on the cusp of a recalibration/reorientation because of the sound’s association with the space between signals when changing radio or television

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<sup>81</sup> This effect is known by producers as a ‘tape stop,’ it is the sound that occurs when an old tape recorder or record player was powered down with the sound still engaged.



stations.



**Visual representation of the “tape stop” effect applied to “Imperial March,” signaling the transition to the next phase of the track.**

Thirty seconds into the track, the “beat” begins - the original material is deconstructed and reconfigured through sampling. It’s not so transformed that the source material is unrecognizable, just enough so that you can hear the creativity of the sample flip.<sup>82</sup> This technique is referred to as “chopping,” taking one long piece of recorded material, cutting it down to smaller pieces, and rearranging them to create new melodies and new patterns. This form of beatmaking relies on the deconstruction of a sound object to construct a different one. In the case of “HDLV Intro,” just a few measures of the original “Imperial March” provide the producer enough material to chop and restructure.

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<sup>82</sup> Some of Joseph Schloss’s consultants talk about this in *Making Beats*, this compositional technique of leaving the source material intact to begin with, having it fresh in the listener’s ear, so you can show immediately the creativity of your treatment. It also allows the listener to immediately be in the in-group. Even if they don’t recognize the sample being played at the beginning, they can recognize that it is being used as sample material, instead of having to pick out what the sample is without ever hearing it intact in the song.

Ala Marcia  $\text{♩} = 112$

The musical score is divided into three color-coded sections: a yellow section (measures 1-4), a red section (measures 5-8), and a blue section (measures 9-12). The Strings part features a melody with triplets and accents. The Brass part is mostly silent in the first section but has a melodic line in the second and third sections. The Percussion part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplets and accents.

Color-coded sections represent the sonic segments sampled for the construction of “HDLV Intro”

The form becomes irregular as the producer loosely mimics the original Williams composition by having an introduction before unveiling the brass melody; rather than a four-measure set up for the brass, only three measures play before introducing brass samples.

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Ala Marcia" with a tempo of 112. The score is arranged for three main sections: Strings, Brass, and Percussion. The first system includes a yellow highlight on the Strings staff, a red highlight on the Percussion staff, and a blue highlight on the Brass staff. The second system features a purple highlight on the Strings staff, a green highlight on the Brass staff, and an orange highlight on the Percussion staff. Below the main score, there are two staves labeled "String Samples" and "Brass Samples" showing individual sample triggers for each instrument.

### The basic layout of the beat

After four measures including brass samples, the seventh overall measure of the beat, a snare drum roll and crescendo signifies that the vocals are about to begin. Underneath the vocals, the beat returns to its initial brass-less pattern, making the most space for the vocals without making the song too intense too soon. Over the course of the 24 measures of rap, the beat

grows in intensity through the addition of other samples like brass and snare drum rolls, culminating in a brass crescendo into the final lyric.

The beat is integral to the overall feeling of horror the song seeks to create. As the analysis shows, it is deliberately irregular and off-kilter, a sonified form of the general affect that horrorcore enacts. Similar to horror films, the beat begins as something familiar, recognizable; it is through a mutation - in this case, the sonic aberration caused by the tape stop - that feelings of unease begin to form. When the familiar suddenly becomes unrecognizable as what it once was, the feelings of horror can begin to take hold. Similar to the popular horror figure of the zombie, the producer reanimates the familiar sounds in an unfamiliar way, close enough to recognize the original form, but different enough to understand that it is no longer what you believe it to be. The various crescendos draw attention to the intensity of lyrics and their meaning, but also serve to heighten the senses, preparing the listener to be further horrified.

Back with a vengeance for all those in attendance  
You are now about to witness King Gordy at his sickest  
In the darkest hours got the heart and power to devour all the light  
You can't stop me cowards, come into the night where  
Vampires drink blood and wolves howl at the moon  
And zombies are eating flesh, they're hopping out of their tombs  
To consume, you are food, you are doomed, I am warnin' ya  
Don't go to Florida, or you are soon to be one of them  
Hurry up, sniff some bath salts, laugh your ass off  
Then get a bad cough and start biting your own hands off  
Feels great, never been late for class at Penn State  
Since they, started fucking me, supposed to been safe  
But Jerry Sandusky always kept his hands on me  
He's a hairy man, trust me, and his balls were very damn musty  
Now who's hotter than Luke's father with new Prada  
Boots on 'em, you oughta choose one of the two hardest  
Men who ever walked this Earth  
Except I was taught at birth  
The dark side was the way and the Jedi could never stop the curse  
We're villains and we're killin' shit

Intentions is to get a bigger engine which is victims to strengthen a sick religion it's  
Benefits, truth is the music is just a privilege  
Get 'em into it then use it to get their children involved  
We are all in this now is our war  
Get high for him, die for him, he is your Dark Lord  
King Gordy, "HDLV Intro" (2012)

Perhaps even more than the liminality presented by the album cover and the deconstruction of "Imperial March" for new ends, the lyrics to "HDLV Intro" represent a rupture between imagined horrorscape and nonfictional horrors. King Gordy weaves back and forth between them, creating a space that is neither completely fictional nor completely based on true events. Gordy begins with a content warning, then makes reference to common fictional monsters like vampires and flesh-eating zombies. He then quickly turns to what was then a current event, issuing a cautionary tale against traveling to Florida, referencing the zombie-like crimes that occurred in Miami in May of 2012 wherein a homeless man allegedly consumed bath salts and began to consume the face of another homeless man in broad daylight on a busy highway. In true horrorcore fashion, he then encourages listeners to take bath salts. Gordy also places himself in the subject position of a sexual assault victim embroiled in the scandal with now-imprisoned former Penn State football assistant coach Jerry Sandusky. The resulting track can leave the listener questioning which parts are meant to be "taken seriously" and which should be passed off as artistic choice<sup>83</sup>. But in a broader sense, constantly walking the tightrope between "real" and "imagined" allows King Gordy to use the poetics of horrorcore to create artistic space in which to reference the city, urban space, and the horrors therein. In this space, he draws on events both actual and fictional without having to specifically say "Detroit" all the time.

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<sup>83</sup> I make this distinction with some trepidation: artistic choices should hold merit, yet a litany of cases using rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials demonstrate that rap is often not afforded the freedom of existing as art in a fictional space.

Certainly the lyrics invoke many of the established horrorcore thematic tropes, from abject violence and gore, to sexual assault, to mental illness. Gordy's references to various creatures from across the horror pantheon demonstrate his reliance on a poetics of horror, the assumption of strong cultural associations with darkness, blood, and the monstrous. Detroit is often described in monstrous terms, and these images also connect to his and other Detroit horrorcore artists' perception of the city as horrorscape. As Draus and Roddy (2015) note in their analysis of Detroit as monstrous, the predatory nature of the city can be viewed as vampiric; a general sense of mindlessness, perhaps the mindlessness of no longer being affected by the everyday horrors of Detroit, can be considered zombie-like. The sudden shift to non-fictional events - the "zombie attack" committed by a man high on bath salts in Florida, and the repeated sexual assault of student athletes committed by Jerry Sandusky - employed by King Gordy serves as reminder to the listener that the horrors he cites, and the horrors that inspire him, are in fact very real, and should be very shocking. Toggling between grotesque non-fictional events and fictional, sensationalized violence creates a general sense of confusion and ambivalence to horror; a listener is forced to ping-pong between things they should be disgusted by because of their occurrence in the 'real world' as it were, and things that should disgust them because they are horrific, but likely do not because of their ubiquity. It is precisely this ambivalence that is integral to King Gordy's conception of horrorcore, which he has stated does not include anything more shocking than what is seen on the nightly news. Gordy then returns back into the Darth Vader persona, further separating himself from acts of horror similar to what is achieved through references to mental illness in horrorcore. The Star Wars references also reinforce and are enhanced by the irregular use of "Imperial March" in the construction of the beat, signaling a poetics informed by both lyrical meaning

and sonic meaning. There is also a strange omen produced in the lyrics “truth is the music is just a privilege / Get 'em into it then use it to get their children involved.” It is unclear what King Gordy is advocating, but it can be read in nefarious terms: music is simply a carrot on a string dangled in front of listeners to produce zombies/soldiers/drones, and to recruit their offspring for similar purposes. There are always multiple ways to interpret lyrics, but in this case, the poetic ambivalence created through lyrics adds to the overall feelings of disgust, unknowability, and unthinkability that are central to horror, and to a poetics of horrorcore.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that Detroit artists in a hip-hop subgenre known as horrorcore reflect upon the idea of a dead and decaying city through a poetics of horrorcore. While many Detroit hip-hop artists employ the city’s state of deadness to various ends including lyrical inspiration, physical backdrop, and soundscape, horrorcore artists use exposure to everyday horrors and violence to create music *of* the city that often does not explicitly mention the city. Horrorcore artists also differ from other Detroit hip-hop artists and mainstream hip-hop artists more generally through their reliance on abject themes ranging from ritual suicide to bestiality - themes considered abnormal or antithetical to accepted social norms, laws, and practice. They look to create an affect of horror not just through the use of abject lyrical themes, but often also through sounds associated with unpleasantness, sounds tied to various acts of violence, dark images, and sounds culturally associated with evil and villainy, like Esham’s use of the *Halloween* theme song or King Gordy’s use of “Imperial March.” This interplay between sound and lyrical image can be considered a poetics of horrorcore and is integral to artists’ attempts to create feelings of abjection and horror in the listener. Horrorcore artists like King

Gordy aim to draw attention to the feelings of shock that should occur upon viewing various decayed and dead parts of Detroit, but often are not, due to a romanticization of ruins that obscures the very real problems faced by working-class, poor, and typically Black residents of Detroit.

My use of ‘poetics’ has been informed by a number of scholars both in and outside of strict music disciplines who use the term to delineate linguistic and sonic practices that allow social groups to cohere, and accounts for what social actors *do*. The poetics of horrorcore, as I have argued, allow artists to directly and indirectly refer to the city of Detroit as derelict, dead, and decaying. These ways of speaking, writing, and thinking about Detroit are consistent with a number of mediated narratives that I have discussed throughout this chapter and this project, ranging from the monstrous, to the lawless, to the corporeal. These artists are acutely aware of their surroundings, and generally place the city in a co-constitutive relationship with the music that they create. This is evinced through interviews and through lyrical analysis.

The rapper Esham is explicit in his reimagining of Detroit *as* Hell and frequently substitutes one place for another lyrically in his music. Still subject to the overarching genre conventions of rap, Esham showed his power and lyrical prowess by presenting himself *as* Satan, the King of the domain known as Hell. This set the precedent for Detroit horrorcore rappers that followed, and King Gordy performs a similar narrative move when imagining himself as Vader presiding over the fictional Empire - a stand-in for Detroit. The poetics of horrorcore allow for this positionality within the music, the ability to linguistically and sonically embody these nefarious characters in order to comment on urban decay in Detroit.



## 5. Ghosts

Somebody's gotta tell them, that we are not ghosts, that we are in this city and we are alive!  
– Activist/Poet Jessica Care Moore in *We Are Not Ghosts* (2012)

Throughout my work, I have analyzed various formulations of death in Detroit that have catalyzed contestations over space (see Chapters One and Two), community and identity formations (see Chapter Three), and local genre conventions (see Chapter Four). Up to this point, the majority of the focus has been on the work of the living, whether their work is in response to proximate death, inspired directly by death, or seeking to subvert it. But I wish to turn my attention to the work of the dead, whose absences echo and create overwhelming presence. In this chapter, I reveal spectral manifestations that have formed within Detroit hip-hop: ghostly ways of sounding, embodying, and practicing with the dead. At times, these ghosts are invited, memorialized, even canonized. At other times, they are present through absences, things unspoken, techniques unused. While there are many examples - in Detroit hip-hop and within hip-hop, generally - three case studies orbiting around one song inform the basis of my exploration. To investigate these hauntings, I reflect upon my experiences - at clubs, in my own car listening to the radio, and listening repeatedly through headphones - hearing the prognosticating echoes in a track titled “Death On Me,” by the late rapper Dex Osama. Additionally, I turn my analysis to various reiterations of and gestures towards this song that exist primarily in online mediated spaces like YouTube. A number of artists have set out to *remix* “Death On Me,” and though remixes typically feature the original performing artist, these remixes have unintentionally invited Dex’s ghost to perform along with them through silences that bear his presence. The interconnectedness of these examples reveals a common hauntology within the music, an ever-so-persistent ghostly presence that

lingers within Detroit hip-hop showing the importance of death in the community of the living.

### **Palimpsestual Tension**

Detroit is filled with specters, apparitions of people, places, spaces, some long dead, some recently passed, some hastily erased, written over, some forgotten; others, lingering. Every “comeback” story of the city either directly or inadvertently gestures towards these ghosts, conjuring up the spirits of communities lost, municipalities bankrupted, businesses closed. In these haunted narratives, the city itself is a revenant, returning to the glory it was forced to leave behind. But as Thomas Wolfe and others have suggested, you can’t *really* go home again. The city’s revitalization has relied on an attempt to build and write over what once was, as developers seek to utilize Detroit’s various legacies for contemporary gain – cultural and economic. At times, it is impossible to disavow the ghostly knowledge - though a particular building is currently home of the Siren Hotel, the facade is still emblazoned with “Wurlitzer Building,” and the hotel’s name itself winks in acknowledgment of this musical memory. Other spirits leave traces not so readily visible. The once thriving community known as Black Bottom has no street signs, no commemorative plaques, no historical markers. Razed in the early 1950s in the name of “progress,” the neighborhood’s primarily Black residences and Black businesses were destroyed and replaced with Interstate 375 - commonly known as the Chrysler Freeway. For most of the years that followed, Black Bottom existed only discursively, ghost stories passed down by former residents and shopkeepers. The post-bankruptcy era of Detroit has seen an invigorated interest in the lost community. A 2017 article in the *Detroit Free Press* illuminates the rupture caused by the neighborhood’s untimely death, and notes the haunting left behind:

St. Aubin and Jay. Monroe and Orleans. Hastings and Fort. Those Detroit intersections sound familiar, but they no longer exist. You can still drive on the individual streets, but the corners have been gone for more than 50 years, along with the adjacent homes, schools, churches, stores, bars, nightclubs, pool halls, barber shops and apartments, not to mention music, street life and preaching. Those corners were part of the street grid of Black Bottom, where many of metro Detroit's African Americans can trace their roots in Michigan. From World War I through the 1940s, the neighborhood rested on the eastern flank of the central business district. Then, in the early 1950s, in one of the most controversial episodes of mass gentrification in Detroit history, the virtually all-white city government bulldozed Black Bottom in the name of “slum clearance,” eventually to replace it with the Chrysler Freeway and Lafayette Park, an upscale residential community that initially was occupied by mostly white residents. Black Bottom is so long gone that you have to be at least Social Security age to have walked its streets, and its memory fades a little each day.

In addition to the *Free Press*’ articles aiming to bring the neighborhood back to (virtual) life, a project known as “Black Bottom Street View” uses photos taken from 1949 to 1950 to pictorially map the neighborhood. Meticulously layering photographs, Black Bottom Street View recreates the neighborhood in 2D. Visitors to the exhibition at the Detroit Public Library’s Main Branch could get just a small semblance of a sense of place by walking through the display. But you can’t really go home again. In Black Bottom’s place exists an express route from the suburbs to the casinos and professional sports stadiums downtown.

In addition to these ghosts, Detroit plays host to many other instances of haunting. As I discussed in Chapters One and Two, and as has been discussed thoroughly by authors including Thomas Sugrue (1996), Grace Lee Boggs (2012), and Mark Binelli (2013), Detroit still contends daily with the lasting effects of discriminatory spatial practices, from racist housing laws to predatory lending to negligence from the city’s emergency services in Black

neighborhoods. As a phenomenon, gentrification is inextricably linked to haunting writ large. Performances like those of Mic Write (see Chapter One) speak with and through the spirits of displaced Black Detroiters in formerly Black Detroit places. There is also the wake left behind by years of corrupt politics, parasitic corporations, and decades of job loss. In Chapter Four, I showed performers' use of the city's blighted topography, or 'ruins', along with mediated representations of Detroit as hellscape in the creation of horrorcore hip-hop, a subgenre that relies on specific traumatic and abject hauntings to persist. In my time in the city and listening to the music, I have heard all manner of spirits. But even beyond the more apparent examples that exist in horrorcore, there are ghosts all throughout Detroit hip-hop, the music, and participation in the music, produces them. Thinking with the active verb rather than the passive, in a sense, Detroit hip-hop *sounds* haunted.

### **There's An Echo**

Such a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a conscience that looks  
death in the face, is another name for freedom.  
Jacques Derrida (1992: 17)

My mama said I got death on me; the reason why I got this vest on me.  
-Dex Osama, "Death on Me"

There is an echo, hardly noticeable at first - certainly not to my ears, anyway. The first few times it entered my space, I did not know I was hearing it - I wasn't *listening* to the echo. Yet it was always there -- a sonic sign of that which has happened, but also evidence of something happening *now*, with each repeated play. An echo is supposed to fade away, to die. As Mark Smith (2002; 2015) has noted, echoes allow us to trace temporal and spatial origin, they are inherently historical. An echo is the final trace of what was once full and present, a means to locate a genesis. But, a step beyond recorded sound, which we always

already experience *ex post facto*, a mediated echo traps those final traces, giving the sounds no chance to truly decay, allowing them to be recalled at any moment. Existentially delayed, recording an echo causes a temporal rupture, giving reproducibility to a dying or dead moment. These echoes linger indefinitely - they are sounds that haunt. Louis Chude-Sokei also writes of the echo's penchant for disrupting timelines.

To prognosticate is to prophesy, and echoes are important sonic qualities and symbolic figurations of space, time, and, of course, replication, doubling (aka dubbing). Echoes are also signs of the past, in that they represent a sound or a signal that has already been deployed and is in decay...But echoes here should be read as Jacques Attali would read them, as “premonitory,” when he argues that “the noises of a society are in advance of its material conflicts.” (2017: 82)<sup>85</sup>

Considering an echo premonitory - *pre-anything*, for that matter - disturbs notions of echoes reverberating out after events take place, causing yet another temporal rupture. Reading with Chude-Sokei and Attali, it is clear that echoes are material, follow soundings, and that they can precede material events in a prophetic fashion (Chude-Sokei's article carries the title “Prognosticating Echoes”). But echoes can also precede sounds.

Thomas Porcello (2003) writes of an analog recording phenomenon known as ‘print-through’ - the (typically) unwanted transfer of signal from one layer of magnetic recording tape to the two layers of tape that are in contact with it, due to the reel being tightly wound. This print-through results in what can be heard as ‘pre-echo’ and ‘post-echo’, sounds that occur atemporally to when they are *meant* to occur in the recording. As their prefixes imply, pre-echoes occur in passages preceding the sound you are meant to hear at the time you are meant to hear it, post-echoes, after. Often these displaced sounds were not noticeable in

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<sup>85</sup> Chude-Sokei quotes Attali 1985: 11.

recordings, simply being masked by the stronger signal occurring during those moments on the tape. However, they could sometimes be heard at the beginning or end of a recording or during a moment of extreme dynamic contrast. Porcello recalls the inner tension he felt as a youth when listening to albums with extreme print-through and the release that came from hearing the “real” beginning after the pre-echo. There is an affective response that comes from “hearing what you are about to hear” (Porcello 2003: 266). I have had similar visceral reactions to pre-echoes. “Resolution,” the second movement of John Coltrane’s celebrated masterwork *A Love Supreme* (1965), has repeatedly caused such reverberations within me. The track opens with a buoyant, yet weighty, unaccompanied solo from bassist Jimmy Garrison - actually a continuation of the solo he begins to play at the close of the first movement, “Acknowledgment.” Garrison’s solo leads the listener into the next movement, and in the solo’s final moments before the full ensemble enters at the head,<sup>86</sup> the faintest F (F for Coltrane’s B flat tuned instrument, the tenor sax; E flat in concert pitch) can be heard prior to the quartet rushing through the speakers in a sheet of sound. Coltrane enters before Coltrane enters, and I now find myself seeking out this trace upon every listen; my preexisting knowledge of this print-through does not stop me from marveling every time. The immediate payoff after whispered, intense foreshadowing inspires a knowing sort of jouissance. Though Porcello does not explicitly present his work through any sort of hauntological framework – that is to say he does not speak of ghosts, nor does he seem preoccupied with that sort of ghostly phenomenological framing when talking about the materiality of sound – it is useful to think with his discussions of rupture in temporal logics,

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<sup>86</sup> In jazz parlance, the head is the beginning of the usually written melody to the tune. This is in contrast to the many improvised sections that typically occur in jazz - the head is a signpost to which all the musicians can easily return.

and to consider the phenomenon of recorded sounds “out of time”<sup>88</sup> as a particularly prescient kind of haunting, wherein an echo can tell us as much, or perhaps more, about the future as it does about the past.

In Greek mythology, Echo was a nymph whose speaking abilities were cursed by Hera - the curse caused Echo to only be able to repeat the last words spoken to her by someone else. Because of this curse, Echo was unable to express her feelings to the object of her affection, Narcissus, who spurned her advances and opted to continue staring at and falling in love with his own reflection, as if it were a completely separate person. As Narcissus slowly died in front of his own reflection, Echo’s feelings only grew. Despondent over his passing and transformation into a flower, she began to wither away and eventually died - all that remains of Echo is the sound of her voice. Obviously, as with all Greek mythology, and mythology in general, the story is “reverse engineered,” so to speak - it is written to explain the origin of some observable phenomenon, to ground it in the supernatural. If each sound, ἦχος (*ēchos*) in Greek, was considered to be a single, one-time event, some other entity must be reproducing the sounded facsimile one heard reflected back. Both ‘echo’ and ‘narcissist’ remain and are widely used in the current English lexicon, but it seems that the mythological link between the words is sometimes overlooked when discussing one or the other. In other words, echoes and narcissism are seldom linked, and furthermore, echoes are seldom linked to ego in the way that narcissism is. The observation that a person ‘likes the sound of their own voice’ does not necessarily point to echo.<sup>89</sup> As Peter Doyle has previously theorized, it is worthwhile to consider Echo’s role in the myth of

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<sup>88</sup> Literally outside of temporal logic, not “off-tempo.”

<sup>89</sup> It can be argued that technically, one always hears echo when hearing the sound of their own voice, but typically the reflection is too near and too fast to be observed as echo and is heard as *reverberation* – not a direct reflection, but the fast reflections of an echo off of multiple surfaces.

Narcissus as it pertains to current understandings of narcissism and ego - it seems that Narcissus' self-infatuation was enhanced and accelerated by not only seeing his own reflection in the water, but by hearing his words repeated, spoken back to him like some persistent "yes man," agreeing with and sharing all of his sentiments. As Doyle writes:

Naturally occurring echo - hearing one's own voice 'emanating' from a chasm or cliff, or hearing footsteps bouncing off a distant wall - remains a deeply intriguing effect: that which is manifestly not the self seems to reproduce the sounds we make, or may even address us with our own voice. Atavistically, the phenomenon suggests that the world is animist: the non-human possesses human characteristics, it 'talks'. Echo suggests at once the possibility of a deep, extended reciprocity between the self and the world, just as it indicates a total imprisonment in selfhood...her continuing sonic presence acts as a constant lament for Narcissus's lost opportunity, but also hints at the (slim) possibility of a future reconciliation between the Narcissistic self and the Echoic other. (2004: 32)

An echo's role in ego edification and identity reification can be observed easily in any cavernous space - the right space will turn anyone into a narcissist, clamoring at the chance to raise their voices and hear themselves reflected back. Videos on YouTube of the Baptistry at Pisa, the Gol Gumbaz mausoleum in India, the "Echo Wall" at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, etc., all feature crowds doing everything from singing, to shouting, to clapping, to whispering, delighted to hear how distantly the sounds they produce can be transmitted and reflected back to them. The Inchindown Oil Tanks in Scotland hold the record for the world's longest echo (Cox 2015), with scientists elated that they can produce sounds and hear the echo and reverberations for nearly two minutes. It is both fascinating and existentially satisfying to know that one can occupy space and time in such a manner. But as these videos also demonstrate, clarity can quickly be lost as multiple sounds and reverberations overlap. The National Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., presents a



famous example of echoes perceived as noise. According to the official Architect of the Capitol website:<sup>90</sup>

The Hall was rebuilt in its present form by Latrobe and his successor, Charles Bulfinch, between 1815 and 1819. Unfortunately, the smooth, curved ceiling promoted annoying echoes, making it difficult to conduct business. Various attempts to improve the acoustics, including hanging draperies and reversing the seating arrangement, proved unsuccessful. The only solution to this problem was to build an entirely new Hall, one in which debates could be easily understood. In 1850, a new Hall was authorized, and the House moved into its present chamber in the new House wing in 1857.

In this case, echo is a pest, turning into noise - unwanted sound - causing members of Congress to hear themselves *too much*, in a way that obstructs clear communication and understanding. But the issue wasn't that people were hearing too much echo from themselves; it was the sounds of Others, not self, that created the noise. Like the "mirror stage" described by Jacques Lacan, the echo can be a particularly self-alienating form of apperception. Through echoes, one perceives what they believe to be the sounding self vs. the sounding other, forced to contend with how they think they sound against what they hear reflected back. The self is formed through sound and echo, and noise seems to form the other.

As I write this paragraph, I am attempting to go a full day without speaking. Admittedly, I had one minor slip and spoke two words to myself before catching myself and stopping. I have no religious or spiritual goals for this - I am attempting to see how disorienting it is to not hear the sound of my own voice, to not hear Echo speaking back to me. I want to know how much of my self is reliant on hearing my thoughts outwardly spoken and reflected back, rather than just hearing them with my "inner ear," as it were. Speaking

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/national-statuary-hal>

does things for the psyche that thinking, or writing, or typing cannot, because sound locates us firmly in space. Like a vast majority of fauna that have hearing, humans echolocate. Due to a well-documented prioritization and reliance on sight over sound (see Sterne 2003), humans are typically not considered an animal that echolocates, the classic examples being bats and dolphins. In the case of bats in particular, echolocation is treated almost as a complete replacement for vision, and the act of echolocation is associated with obstacle avoidance and food discovery. But humans with hearing rely on echolocation for orientation (see Ihde 2007) in a way that may not be obvious unless one spends time in an anechoic chamber, a room specifically designed to contain no reflective sound surfaces. The rooms are typically used to test the decibel levels and noise thresholds of electronic equipment meant for the broader consuming public, like noise-cancelling headphones or microphones. While I have yet to experience one, there are numerous articles, journalistic pieces and online media posts about peoples' experiences in them – perhaps the most famous of these being John Cage's recollection of visiting such a room in 1951, which is said to have been at least part of the inspiration behind his iconic piece *4'33"* which requires the performer to sit at a piano without playing it, this "silence" turning the acoustic environment of the performance space into the composition. As all of these stories mention, when one's sound has no echo, it can become a quickly disorienting experience. People typically put this to the test by entering the chamber and having the lights turned off. It soon becomes impossible to determine one's location within the room, the distance of objects or other people in the room, etc. Typically unheard sounds, like the blood circulating to the brain, or quieter digestion sounds, can all be heard clearly in an anechoic chamber. While some people report experiencing a zen like state spending time in a pitch black anechoic chamber, typical stories involve people becoming

disoriented, distressed, and physically ill. Hearing people need echo not just to know where they are, but *who* they are. Echoes both locate one in space/place and help to create a sense of self and belonging in these spaces and places.

## **Who/Where Am I?**

It is the beginning of a long week of fieldwork events for me. On this night, I think things will be relatively low key; I am headed to a spot called TV Lounge to watch some open mic emcee performances. I arrive early, as is my wont, and sit around waiting for the show to begin. I have decided ahead of time not to drink this night because I really want to stay sharp in such a new space, in a place I've never been, in a city where I've only been living for about a week. TV Lounge is quirky. When one first walks in, it looks like a sports bar - TVs up behind the bar, stools at the bar, a few high top tables against the wall. But upon passing through the partition, one is transported into a space that can't quite figure out what it wants to be. A galvanized steel bar runs across the back wall; it is connected to the bar on the other side of the wall. The room itself is rather expansive: a large dancefloor, surrounded by couches. Modern hipster light fixtures – purposely designed to look 'old,' mimicking some of Edison's original bulb designs - hang from the ceiling, like a page out of a trendy home design magazine. Off to the right is a "VIP" like area, elevated above the floor, and with couches of its own. There are lamps around, as if in a living room. The DJ booth is across the room, furthest wall from the entryway, also raised above the dancefloor. I sit in a back corner, trying to observe the whole room and take notes while staying out of the way. But it becomes hard to do, because Detroiters are friendly and sometimes nosy, so I am being approached by people left and right.

“Yo, you a rapper?”

“*Nope, writer.*”

“Bet. What you write about?”

“*Detroit Hip-Hop.*”

“Bet-bet-bet. You tryna smoke?”

The smoking doesn't make my focus better. So much for staying sharp. But it does make me a lot more eager to meet some of the emcees who have reported for open mic duty. The open mic was scheduled to begin at 9 p.m. Now 9:45, I give up on my hopes of ever seeing an open mic performance and decide to just relax and let myself enjoy the music the DJ is playing. Emcees start to show up shortly after my resignation, and finally, at 10:22, the open mic begins. A performer named Ace the Phoenix takes the stage - really just a spot on the dance floor - and begins his performance. It seems very shy, in that he doesn't seem to engage much with the crowd and maintains a closed-off, internal demeanor. I find out after the fact that he appropriately refers to himself as “The Introverted Kid.” More performers pass through the space to perform their material that they have brought on CDs or thumb drives for the DJ to cue. While my initial plan was to focus on emcees while at the open mic night, my night is forever colored by the DJ, the songs he chooses to play during set breaks, and the way that the audience interacts with his choices. DJ Kobe makes it known that he is playing a lot of “Detroit shit” that night, and as a fan of Detroit hip-hop before I moved, I assume that I will know a lot of the songs. But it soon becomes clear that the music played locally is far, far different than the Detroit hip-hop that I know. There is no J Dilla, or Black Milk, or even Guilty Simpson to speak of; I am listening to *street shit*, music from very small, independent Detroit labels (or independent of label), for Detroit residents, played by Detroit DJs and Detroit radio stations. My foreignness, outsidership, is abundantly clear to me – and probably to others – because I don't know the repertoire. So, I set out to learn. First

added to my library is Kash Doll's hustling anthem, "Run Me My Money," which opens, "Let me tell you little somethin' bout me, I'm a boss bitch straight up out the 3-1-3." It is the type of lyric that is unlikely to resonate outside of the local audience, but is obviously anthemic, as it seems that everyone in the room has rushed to the floor to rap along with Kash Doll's locally-infamous chorus: "Run me my money, nigga run me my money. Bitch run me my money." As they echo her sentiments with hands and drinks in the air, I watch and listen in fascination, longing, but afraid to participate, lest I be outed as a non-Detroiter. But it is another track that breaks my world completely open.

The track begins with an eerie atmosphere, repeated notes on a synth bass, wooshing atmospheric sounds. A producer tag that I cannot yet decipher. But the crowd instantly recognizes what is happening and lets out a collectively excited cheer as they rush back to the dance floor with their cocktails in hand. Too embarrassed to admit that this is yet another song I do not recognize, I employ my phone's song-identifying app to discover the track that everyone else knows: Dex Osama's "Death On Me." As the song plays, the crowd seems to know most, if not all of the words. Full-voiced, the people on the dance floor participate in the chorus:

*"These niggas want me dead! They put money on my head!"*

The words stop me dead in my tracks, and I don't think I hear anything else happen for the rest of the song. I am so awestruck, fascinated by this crowd echoing these audacious words in such a celebratory setting and fashion. I am struck by the darkness of the lyrics being recited in harmony - most "club bangers" are about partying, turning up, etc.; they are songs specifically made for the setting of the club. This is clearly a song made by Detroit, for

Detroit, so it seems to work in this setting, even though I cannot interpret it as a party song at all.

Philip Auslander, employing the work of Walter Benjamin and writing primarily about what he refers to as the televisual,<sup>91</sup> argues that the masses' proclivity towards reproduced art works stems from a deep desire to bring things closer to them, be it spatially, visually, sonically, etc. (Auslander 2000). He leans heavily on examples of giant video screens, such as jumbotrons at sports arenas, as evidence that the mass relies on proximity and intimacy via the televisual. Essentially, he argues that one can attend a concert or football game, sit in the back row, and not find their experience distant or impersonal at all because they can simply watch a giant screen rather than strain to see what is happening on the stage or field from which they are so far away. He argues that our deep familiarity with the televisual, which gives us close-up perception, allows us to feel close to an event wherever there is a screen, thus blurring the lines between the live and the mediated. It seems that intimacy must be reintroduced into live events precisely through mediation/videation. But while he discusses screens giving the perception of close proximity at concerts, this formulation does not map neatly onto the experience of sound at a concert, where people are going to hear and sing along with the music. It also does not speak to shows at small venues that have no screens to speak of. Masses would still apparently need to achieve proximity in screenless situations. As my fieldwork experiences showed, a primary way that people achieve this proximity is through performance; individuals perform along with both live performers and recordings to draw sounds near. Rather than solidifying the masses' apparent

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<sup>91</sup> Different than viewing films or other visual media, the televisual is a term that signals the end of television simply as a medium for viewing - it is so seeped into mass culture that television itself has become the context through which all media and performance is consciously and subconsciously filtered.

place as an observer class, voiced performance, particularly in a group, showcases the ability of people to create aura, to be in close proximity to the performers - live or otherwise - and to use repetition and reproduction in the formation of their individual identities.

When people gather to perform along with Dex on the dancefloor, they are becoming the echo of his life and his legacy. They embody his words and simultaneously cement their identities as Detroiters through group performance of such a local cautionary tale. Everyone I've interviewed in Detroit has been aware of the song; I would venture to guess that most people know many of the words. People often make comments about his untimely death. But they still perform his song with a kind of fervor that would leave one to believe they're watching him perform live. It is reminiscent of New Orleans funerals, where the dead are sent off to the afterlife with a celebration. This is not to say that anyone is celebrating that Dex was murdered, but they memorialize him fondly with performances of his song. Also similar to these funerals is the idea that you can interact with the dead so freely, that the barrier between life and death is not very thick. At the same time, life and death can be viewed as very separate categories, and not just one as a continuation of the other. The echo is a sonic representation of this divide. The signal is life, and death is represented by the echo. When the echo is not allowed to fully decay, a haunting occurs. The group performances of "Death On Me" become that echo, and the crowd itself is inviting this haunting to occur, wishing to interact with this ghost.

### **Echoes of Dex**

Dex Osama's life was undoubtedly cut short. He was at a strip club, where his girlfriend was working, and apparently had gotten in a fight with her before being asked to leave. As he stood outside with a friend, he ended up in an altercation with two men, one of whom shot

him before fleeing the scene. As far as locals could tell, Dex was on his rise to stardom, perhaps not global stardom, but at least some national shine. He had been noticed by Meek Mill, an extremely prominent trap hip-hop artist from Philadelphia, and he was signed to Meek's label. Even his name echoes his thoughts about death and being a menace, using "Osama" because of Osama bin Laden, considered the main architect behind the infamous September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. In fact, the album on which "Death On Me" appears is titled *Nine 11*. The album - perhaps EP is more appropriate - features nine tracks, most of them fairly short. Thematically, all of the tracks follow the genre conventions of gangsta rap - talk of drug running, smuggling, selling; busting guns, doing time, homicide. But "Death On Me" hits the ears differently. As the story is told, Dex had many conversations with his mother in which she warned him that he needed to change his lifestyle because he was inviting death into his life with the way he lived. Dex himself had a vision of the grim reaper, and spoke of being in bed, immobilized, possessed by demons as he tried to transition from his gang life into a music-focused one. The lyrics he penned come directly from these premonitions, the idea that death would be visiting him soon. And yet, in the song, after recognizing that he has "death on him," and that he wears a bulletproof vest for precaution, he brags that he is not trying to avoid death really, that he isn't hiding.

In a posthumously published interview with TheHipHopLab,<sup>92</sup> Dex claims that the Devil's voice can actually be heard on the track. He says that he was just out riding one day, really high, and vibing to the song, when he heard an extremely low voice say "Death On

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<sup>92</sup> "Lando Bando Interviews Dex Osama Talks actually feeling 'Death On Him' Part 2 (Seem On Noisey)," posted to YouTube November 27, 2016.



Me.” He called the studio to ask if they had placed an effect on the track, and they had not; he had not put it there himself, either. Dex was essentially haunted, which inspired him to make the track, which contains haunting vocals. The entire song now seems premonitory, as Dex seemingly forecast his own death via homicide. The echo was heard by Dex, an echo of the Devil’s voice appearing on his recording. His homicide echoed the themes of his music, particularly that song. It seemed even more bizarre that Detroiters would use this song to turn up in the club.

Echoes are supposed to fade away, decay, and die. But when an echo is recorded, it can never truly die. At the same time, recordings are essentially perpetual echoes of peoples’ performances that are never allowed to escape. We treat them differently, as “primary” sound sources even though all recordings are dead. Echoes add an extra layer of deadness in the physical world. But echoes also serve a purpose of creating atmosphere and spatial effects in music, and the effect has been used widely in hip-hop to various ends, from creating the effect of being in a large space, à la Biz Markie’s reverberating shout-outs in “Thanks” (1993), to Que’s authoritative echoed-reinforced voice in “OG Bobby Johnson” (2014). Other songs on Dex’s *Nine 11* have an echo effect on his vocals, but “Death On Me” produces a different affect than the others. The lyrics and the real life events that echoed them ensure that the song cannot just be heard as a song, and the echo can’t just be an echo.

The reality of Dex Osama’s passing, inextricably linked to the narrative in the song, allows the delay effect to sound differently as not just an echo as a result of sound occurring, because the echo serves as medium for Dex’s spirit. Steven Feld (1982) observed a similar relationship between sonic echoes and the voices of spirits during his fieldwork amongst the Kaluli people in the Bosavi rainforest of Papua New Guinea. The sounds of the rainforest, in

all of their reverberations, were known as *mama* by the Kaluli, the reflections of things unseen. Yet bird sounds are treated differently by the Kaluli. As they consider birds their ancestors transformed, the sounds made by birds are heard as their voices, and are considered *ane mama*, or “gone reflections.” Spirits of the dead become audible through these gone reflections, echoes of human voices already passed.

## **Words That Bear Repeating**

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* ([1977] 1985), Jacques Attali - channeling Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Dwight Macdonald, and others – develops a critique of mass production in relation to musical repetition. For Attali, repetition was a practice through which meaning was coopted in music; in its industrial reproduction, popular music exists only to produce consumers. Nestled in Attali’s critiques are a number of strong ideological stances, including but not limited to: the belief that there is music with meaning and music without; that this aforementioned “meaning” is something inherent to the music and not ascribed by people and cultural/social narratives; that “popular” music (mass culture) and “learned” music (high culture) are completely disparate, and that one has more value than the other; that music was not a commodity before a market for popular music was created via the “colonization of black music by the American industrial apparatus” (103); and that repetition in/of music did not exist before the advent of recording technology. In a chapter titled “Repeating,” Attali notes that repetition - in this case, the recording and reproduction of music - created an object that outlasted its usage - usage being the one-time temporal/social/historical/cultural moment in which a performance occurred. Attali writes:

At the same time, usage becomes transformed, *accessibility replaces the festival*. A tremendous mutation. A work that the

author perhaps did not hear more than once in his lifetime (as was the case with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the majority of Mozart's works) becomes accessible to a multitude of people, and becomes repeatable outside the spectacle of its performance. It gains availability. It loses its festive and religious character as a simulacrum of sacrifice. It ceases to be a unique, exceptional event, heard once by a minority. The sacrificial relation becomes individualized, and people buy the individualized use of order, the personalized simulacrum of sacrifice. ([1977] 1985: 100)

Beyond the idea that only the original holds authority, Attali argues that a departure from the spectacle of performance contributes to a loss of meaning in music. It would follow that the aura, the assumed intrinsic value of a work of art, is only available to a select few, a single time. In privileging the idea of an "exceptional event, heard once by a minority," Attali presents an elitist version of a view most often attributed to Heraclitus: no man steps in the same river twice. It would only be the first step into the river that held value and all return trips would hold less value; opening the river to the general public would remove what was special about stepping into the river in the first place. But this assumes that there was ever a communal, shared *correct* interpretation of a work of art, and not a collective experience with a work of art made up of multiple subjectivities and interpretations.

I agree that no one steps in the same river twice - each encounter with a recording is different, and we are different people with different experiences each time we listen to a recording;<sup>93</sup> where I deviate is in my belief that repetition yields meaningful, exceptional experiences, and each encounter with repetition can create new meaning, can reinforce important cultural values, or can reify identity. There are many types of repetition, both

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<sup>93</sup> It is common to the point of banality for people to mention "hearing something they've never noticed before" when discussing listening to their favorite recordings for the nth time. Because of our relation to temporality and space, it is impossible to recreate an entire experience with a recording exactly as it was the first/last time it was heard. Walser talks about the number of samples in PE as requiring new listenings each time.

mechanically reproduced and organically reproduced, that are integral parts of Black life and music making. As Eileen Southern (1971; 1982), Portia Maultsby (1976; 1992), and other scholars have revealed, field hollers, gospel, jazz, and other Black American musical styles use call and response, a type of collective, democratic repetition that relies upon group participation to create a coherent picture. Additionally, storytelling and other oral traditions rely on the repetition of tales told by the elders; bodily rituals and dances from the ring shout to the running man rely on repetitive motion.<sup>94</sup> Recording technologies have provided a means of augmenting by the instrumentalized vocal and the vocalized instrumental in Black music.<sup>95</sup> John Coltrane's recorded, voiced repetition of "A Love Supreme" provided an avenue for transcendence; hip-hop producers use various machines and software to chop samples and endlessly repeat short sections of sound<sup>96</sup> to create beats, and the use of recorded sounds in sampling is a layered kind of repetition, a literal and figurative repeating of sounds that came before. My fieldwork revealed to me a mode of Black performative repetition that I'd not considered repetition before. In rapping along with recorded hip-hop tracks in public spaces, people perform a kind of real-time repetition, becoming a temporal echo for a voice recorded, and it is through this echo that they realize their place within the community. It is mass production done differently - the mass literally produces meaning and identity in echoing the recording.

## Hearing The Ghost

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<sup>94</sup> The repetition and reiteration of ancestral knowledge could be considered flashes of the spirit, as coined by Robert Farris Thompson (1983).

<sup>95</sup> Thank you to George Lipsitz for providing this useful phrasing and way of thinking through mediated repetition in Black music.

<sup>96</sup> A technique known as looping.

Echoes sound differently depending on what space you are in. The same celebratory echo of the crowd performing “Death On Me” in a club would likely sound different in a bigger space, or in a much smaller one. But it is sometimes an echo that lets you know what space you are in, i.e. echolocation. These echoes mark distance and boundaries, in the sense that their soundings delineate Self and Other, us and them, Detroiter and outsider. It was as if the attendees of the TV Lounge created, reiterated, reified their Detroitness by becoming the echo for Dex on the track. The echoes they create and embody through collective performance are not only an orienting, identity bolstering response, but also a way to memorialize Dex, a part of their community forcibly taken from them during an unnecessary act of gun violence. But I did not hear the echo until I was listening to the song alone, driving down the highway. I needed to be alone to be haunted.

I think I hear his ghost. It isn’t until I’m driving down the M-10 - known locally as ‘The Lodge,’ a shortening of John C. Lodge Freeway - listening to “Death On Me” through my car’s stereo system, that I’m able to hear the ghost. Maybe I just needed to be alone, encased, in a proper state of mind and a proper space to suspect and acknowledge I’m being haunted. I’ve been revisited by this ghost with every subsequent listen - now that I know it is there, it is almost all that I can hear. I have encountered these sorts of resonances before, temporal and physical reverberations of some sonic artefacts that haunt my listening.<sup>97</sup> Once an ear is oriented towards a particular sound in a recording, it tends to rely on that sound for future orientation - in other words, once you hear it, you can’t unhear it.

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<sup>97</sup> Such as the pre echo in John Coltrane’s “Resolution” from *A Love Supreme* (1965) that I previously mentioned. My ears obsessively seek it out; it is the most essential part of my experience with the recording now.

It makes sense that I had missed the sound of the echo while I was in the club, because it was a new song to me, in a noise-filled environment, with lots of people participating in the group performance of the track. But in this enclosed environment, the echo sounds so pronounced. This echo is different than one heard “out in the wild”; the reflections I’m hearing are a result of digital production and not a representation of the environment in which the song was recorded. Technically, what I’m hearing is a signal processing effect known as *delay*, wherein the audio signal is recorded and played back at a specified time. Temporally speaking, this is different from a natural echo that is the result of one sound signal being reflected, but it can create the same effect for the ears. Mechanically-produced echo began at least as early as the 1940s/50s era of *musique concrète*, when creators would shorten or lengthen tape to achieve a delayed effect. In terms of recording music with echo, histories often talk about it becoming inconvenient to record in spaces with echo and reverb, which might leave one questioning what the appeal of echo on a recording is in the first place.

Concerned with space and place, Peter Doyle writes that echo and reverb make it seem like the music is “coming from a somewhere...and this ‘somewhere’ was often semiotically highly volatile ” (2005: 5). Primarily interested in the fabrication of space in popular music, Doyle explores the various spaces and places evoked in a number of recordings from 1900 to 1960, from the mythicized frontier of the Wild West to the cold, metallic spaces of the imagined urban. He also links some echoes, like those present in Vaughn Monroe’s 1949 hit “[Ghost] Riders In The Sky,” to hallucinatory spaces of haunting, imagined supernatural realms like hell, haunted houses, and cemeteries – echoes resound beyond spaces of ‘reality.’ In Monroe’s song, a tape delay effect is used during the chorus to

give the impression of the singers (the ghost riders) being both far away and ethereal in comparison to the primary vocalist's close miked, very present voice. The distance we perceive in space contributes to our perceptions of the real and imagined, the present and absent; this spatial orientation and association is reinforced not only by music, but by filmic/televisual representations of the mystical that use distance and delay to aid and reinforce their narratives.

Dex seemed to be very fond of the echo/delay effect on his rapped vocals, as they are a feature in many of his songs - particularly the songs on his album *Nine II*. But the context of "Death On Me" makes the delay and space take on new meaning. Dex prognosticated his own death and recorded it: already a seemingly supernatural act. In this context, the song already *sounds* as haunted; it is an oracular record of a mystical act. The delay serves to enhance, and complicate, this haunted affair. Similar to the prognosticating echoes theorized by Chude-Sokei, these sounds that come after (the echo effect on his voice) come *before* an event. The recorded echo ruptures ideas of temporality. The delay in the recording gives both a menacing effect (likely the effect initially intended on this track and his other tracks), and a ghostly one. The echo can also be heard as representative of the cityscape of Detroit - cavernous, open, desolate, desperate. The sound bounces through the emptiness. One imagines abandoned buildings where sounds echo and reverberate off once occupied floors and decorated walls. Particular kinds of delay effect also disorient the listener, sometimes to the point where it is hard to tell the sound's origin point. It is likely that this was also an intended effect, to create a sense of unease that would aid the dark, menacing lyrics. But I cannot hear the echo as anything but Dex's own ghost, performing along with him on the recording, trying to give extra warning of the events to come.

So strong are human associations of sound with space, and space with affect, that a producer would deem it necessary to artificially create echo for a track (Doyle 2005). Vocals are professionally recorded in dry<sup>98</sup> environments, in isolation booths to ensure that no unwanted sounds enter the recording. Then a delay effect is added. Because of current industry standards, to simply record in an echoic space would sound unprofessional and amateurish. Improper echo makes a recording sound like it was recorded in a bathroom - incidentally, this was a technique famously employed by Motown Records producers to get their desired echo and reverb. But as previously discussed, a delay effect is different than a natural echo in that it is actually the playback of a recorded sound, not the reflection of a sound. This artificial echo, the playing back of the sound at a later time, is essentially what happens with any recording - it is played back later. But psychologically, it has the same effect on perception and ego - one is still hearing the voice twice, whether or not it is natural or artificial.

Dex's echo also seems pronounced because of a Detroit street rap<sup>99</sup> style convention - the tendency to rap 'ahead' of the beat. A number of scholars including Adam Bradley (2009), Adam Krims (2000), and Tricia Rose (1994) have talked about aspects of a rapper's flow, their rhythmic delivery, from articulative features, to syllable placement, to the content. In "On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music," music theorist Kyle Adams (2009) goes into painstaking detail breaking down the rhythmic, syllabic, and poetic techniques used by various rappers. Using spreadsheets to map beats and individual syllables, Adams compares, with great success, a number of large variances in delivery. Yet, with one

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<sup>98</sup> Physical spaces with an extremely small amount of reverberation.

<sup>99</sup> Detroit street rap is typically independently produced rap that is influenced by a stereotypical 'street' lifestyle, what may have been associated with gangsta rap in the late 80s and early 90s.



exception, all of the example songs he provides still subscribe to a general sense of strict cadence where syllables land precisely on beats or subdivide beats evenly. The exception, “Wu Gambinos” by Raekwon (1995) features a verse by fellow Wu-Tang Clan member The RZA that Adams describes as having an “increasingly manic, irregular rhythm, with many thirty-second notes and irregular beat subdivisions, and with rhyming and accented syllables in unpredictable locations.” The RZA’s verse does indeed sound erratic at times, with some lines seeming to both expand and contract temporally. Yet, for the most part, his lines still end on strong beats, often on beat four. In this example, or the other examples in the article, including Kurtis Blow’s “Basketball” and Blackalicious’ “Blazing Arrow,” there is typically never more than a beat of space between lines - often, there is a half beat, or no space at all. Borrowing Adams’s method to analyze the first four bars of “Death On Me” helps to reveal how the echo becomes so pronounced and noticeable. A bar is equal to a measure of music, each row represents a bar, each column represents a 16th note subdivision of a single beat:

1	x	y	Z	2	x	y	z	3	x	y	z	4	x	y	z
					my	ma-	ma	said	I	got		death		on me	
					the	rea-	son	why	I	got	this	vest		on me	
					These	nigg-	as	want	me	then		come		get	me
						I	ain’t	hi-	din’	nigga	I’m	in	the	city	

While being far from an accurate representation of the “aheadness” of Dex’s delivery at the end of the first, second, and fourth bar, this table reveals a logic to his flow. The combination of Dex finishing most of his bars before the expected, conventional endpoint of a strong beat, and his lines not connecting to one another spatially in his delivery gives a wide berth of space for the echo to fill. The first three bars begin on the second 16th subdivision of beat

two. The rhymes between bars one and two are apparent; “death” and “vest” are the primary rhymed words and fall on beat four. The lyrics “I got” and “on me” are repeated in the same place in bars one and two. Most noticeable overall is the amount of blank space at the beginning of each bar, space that typically follows space at the end of the bar that came before. Without echo, this space could potentially feel awkward and empty. From a performer’s point-of-view, this echo can be heard as lyrical reinforcement, a role often performed by “hype men,” performers who occasionally rap but are generally there to invigorate the crowd (à la Flavor Flav of Public Enemy) or to invigorate the crowd *and* echo/perform along with the accented moments in a verse (à la the other two Beastie Boys when the third is rapping). For a producer, echo can fill that space, but can also serve the purpose of giving the track a particular feel, creating an illusion of space, grounding the recording in a particular era or style (Doyle 2005). As the song continues, there is not always the same amount of space at the beginning of the bar; there is, however, *always* space for the echo, as Dex does not begin a single bar directly on the downbeat of one. As I drove down The Lodge listening to the song on repeat, I came to hear the echo as ghostly, focusing on the delay effect rather than the primary signals. It was via repeated listenings through headphones that I began to hear those open beats as a space for haunting, the space for Dex’s premonitory ghost to speak clearly.

## **Internal**

With this association always on the verge of turning literal, it is hard to decide whether ghosts and haunting elucidated new scientific processes and technologies or vice versa.

Inventions in the nineteenth century and beyond, while based on the most specific of mechanical processes, became entangled in the webs of the supernatural, and often returned to questions of life and what came after it. (Blanco and Pereen 2013: 200)

Scholars have focused on divisions between sonic publics and sonic privacy for decades, and a number have focused specifically on the use of headphones in creating divisions between the two (see: Hosokawa 1984; Sterne 2003; Bull 2006; Hagood 2011; Blue V 2017; Hagood 2019). A general consensus is that headphones are transformative, allowing one to isolate in a “private world of sounds” (Sterne 2003: 87), or, in the case of mobile music technologies, to “carry [their] auditory identity in the palm of [their] hand” (Bull 2006: 131). Although listening is an inherently internal phenomenon in that vibrations must enter the body to experience it, using headphones adds the dimension of perceived privacy, and as Jonathan Sterne notes, they can “intensify and localize listeners’ auditory fields, making it much easier to pay attention to minute sonic details and faint sounds” (2003: 87). These faint sounds are traces of things you thought you heard, but were not quite sure of. Headphones opened my ears to a haunted sound world inhabited by more echoes than I had initially considered: echoed lyrics, loops, basslines, narratives. Headphones seemed to make the space of the recording much larger than it had felt at TV Lounge coming out of a massive speaker system, and even larger than it felt in my car. Through headphones, there was no way for any other sound to enter -- no people’s voices, no highway sounds, only the recording and my thoughts, which were quickly consumed by the sounds coming through the headphones. Headphone listening had turned me into a man possessed by “Death On Me.”

Black subjectivities are always already considered public, outwardly expressive, and generally resistant. As Kevin Quashie notes, “resistance...is the dominant framework for reading black culture” (2012: 11). Fred Moten predates this statement with the first sentence of *In The Break*, noting that Blackness is evidence of the fact that “objects can and do resist” (2003: 1). Quashie theorizes that this is a side effect of the way racial difference is marked in

the public sphere - publicness has been inextricably linked to struggles for racial equality (and necessarily so), and Black subjectivity has been “characterized largely by its responses to racial dominance, so much so that resistance becomes its defining feature and expectation” (2012: 11). Noting canonical concepts used in discussions of Black culture (*doubleness*, *signifying*, *wearing the mask*) are associated with public expression and outward, publicly performative action, Quashie goes in search of a Black interiority, one that “gestures away from the caricatures of racial subjectivity that are either racist or intended to counter racism” and encapsulates what is “essentially and indescribably human” (2012: 21). The interior, he finds, is a slippery concept, difficult to understand or describe without outward expression.<sup>100</sup> But he concludes that the interior, particularly for Black people, is a space of quiet - an expressiveness that is not linked to publicness. Quashie writes:

Quiet, then, is the inexpressible expressiveness of this interior, an expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, challenge or counter social discourse, yet none of this is its aim or essence. That is, since the interior is not essentially resistant, then quiet is an expressiveness that is not consumed with intentionality, at least in regard to resistance. It is in this way that the distinction between quiet and silence is clearer. Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed, and is an interiority that is about withholding, absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence (one can, for example, describe prose or a sound as quiet) and can encompass fantastic motion. (2012: 22)

Quiet is present, quiet moves. Quiet seems to describe a rich, inner life that does not have to be shaped by the act of resistance. Quiet is a dimension separate from dominant, public ideas about subjectivity. But as Allen Weiss, Jonathan Sterne, David Toop, and other scholars have

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<sup>100</sup> Complementary to Quashie’s formulations of Black interiority, Margo Natalie Crawford writes of a Black public interiority, which she defines as “art that is public and tied to the Black interior” (2017: 168).

written (or alluded to), we often associate sound with the spectral, the otherworldly, the uncanny. Sounds come from a “somewhere,” and that place can be unknown, or fabricated, or misinterpreted. The seemingly otherworldly, supernatural qualities of sound have been invoked by writers for centuries.<sup>101</sup> Allen Weiss (1995) investigates associations between radio and disembodiment/disembodied voice. Jonathan Sterne (2003) reveals the ways that the advent of sound recording, and sound itself, has always had an association with death, notably showcasing several advertisements and interviews from the beginnings of sound recording technology that feature verbiage about preserving (or even communicating with!) the voices of the dead. David Toop (2010) lends his ear to numerous examples of supernatural fiction, picking up the repeated treatment of sound as unstable, provisional, existing somewhere between scientific knowable and spectral suggestion. These writings point to an understanding of sound having the ability to cross borders between the real and imagined, straddling the lines of conscious and subconscious (or unconscious). While the interior, the space of quiet, is a dimension that is separate from exterior ideas about publicness or resistance, headphone listening can perform the function of supernatural medium, offering a direct conduit for publicness to enter. Listening with headphones is a particularly penetrative act, more so than hearing sounds in the world or listening through speakers. The act of attaching headphones to the ear, whether over- or in-ear, gives soundwaves nowhere to travel but inside, and as Sterne, Bull, Hagood, and others note, this created private space, this fabricated interior, greatly intensifies a listening experience, allowing (sometimes forcing) one to focus more intently than would be possible without headphones.

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<sup>101</sup> For example, Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), Carroll’s “The Jabberwocky” (1871), and the Charles Dickens’ curated collection *The Haunted House* (1859).

Not only do headphones eliminate outside sounds – they also remove much of the ability to hear one's own body, except for some sounds generated from within, like speaking or throat clearing.<sup>102</sup> At a high enough volume, even those sounds can be supplanted by whatever is traveling through the headphones. Listening to “Death On Me” through headphones had infiltrated my interiority, shuffling my quiet to the side and making space for the recording. It is in this reconfiguration of space that the echo - a phenomenon that requires space to exist - began to take on the shape of the ghostly. A rupture of Mark Smith’s assertion that echoes are nothing if not historical, these echoes simultaneously represent the past (they exist on a record, they are already recorded), the present (I am listening to the recording now and can recall the echoes whenever I choose), and the future (the echoes eerily predicted an event that was then yet to happen). I found myself confronted with the legacy of Dex Osama as I heard his voice echo, a tragic legacy that feeds back into repeated traumas of Black life and Black reality in the US and abroad. The seemingly inescapable cycle of violence invoked by the state or extrajudicially, by people who look like you and people who do not. In the echo, I heard the voice of my mother telling me what streets I was not allowed to go on by myself; I heard my father telling me to stay out of the streets, and to make sure my hands were empty and visible if there were ever cops around. “My mama said I got death on me” is more than an anecdote, more than a side conversation to be taken lightly. It is an assertion that comes with generational weight and trauma, the dread that comes from seeing the same Black story have the same Black end over and over and praying that your son is able to escape the overwhelming link between Black life and violent death. He did not listen

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<sup>102</sup> These sounds aren’t really heard from the outside in, like they typically would be, were the ears not covered/plugged by earbuds. We hear them because they’re generated from the same general area that the ears are located.

to his mother, but he also didn't listen to himself, to his own echo. My headphone listening has put me into a state of mourning, and I must take them out. I still hear his ghost.

### **Distorted Echoes: Remixes**

In the years since Dex Osama's death, a number of self-classified "remixes" of "Death On Me" have appeared on YouTube. I find it more productive to consider these iterative performances not as remixes, but as echoes. They exist as obvious references to the original, like remixes, but are more concerned with recreating and repeating an aura, a vibe. They seek to echo the mystique of the original, not remix it. Helped obviously by use of the original beat and by wet/reverberant vocal recording techniques, these Death On Me remixes look to repeat the affect, and to profit from it, in the sense that they are capitalizing on the authority of the original to lend credibility to their own versions. They are reminders of Dex Osama's life that came to a tragic, predicted end. They are a way to signal one's identity as a Detroiter, familiar with the life and times of Dex, familiar with the sounds of the city, familiar with what grounds one in the Detroit hip-hop scene. They also provide a familiarity to the listener, provided that listener is familiar with the original. In a way, I am able to trace and track Dex's ghost through these "remixes," finding the places where his shadow has landed and where the performers seek to deviate from the path, where they try to shake the ghost. But Dex haunts and permeates all performances on this beat. The word *remix* is fraught with cultural baggage, associations with value and compensation, copyright and fair use. To remix is, in a way, to take old and make new. It is to take the preexisting and reconfigure it in such a manner that it yields a different creation, a different imprint on the world. The word has taken on a life of its own within various art worlds, but I am thinking of it in musical terms. If it were just a reiteration of a song that came before, it would be

considered a cover. A remix cuts across time, cuts, chops, rearranges. It transforms the old into the new. At least this is how remixing is written about in remix studies, as evinced in a vast majority of the chapters within collections like the *Companion to Remix Studies* (2015) and *Keywords in Remix Studies* (2017), both published on Routledge by the same group of editors. Even when hip-hop is explicitly written about within the collection (Christopher 2015), the focus is on sampling as remix, which falls within the narrative of rupture/rearrangement. David J. Gunkel's *Of Remixology* (2016) provides a framework for discussing remix beyond the typical debates around creativity vs. laziness that often cloud the discourse around it, showing that both sides of the debate are interested in questions of innovation and integrity, and seek to shield their view from the other. Gunkel fleshes out various terms that have become stand-ins for 'remix' (bricolage, assemblage, sample, etc.) that are remixes in and of themselves in that they have come to mean more than was originally intended in their coinage through their application in media studies, music, fashion, etc. Through this analysis, and throughout his book, he constantly gestures towards the remixability of 'remix,' providing tools for thoughtful considerations of remix in its various forms. But I am primarily interested in the idea of remix in hip-hop and R&B worlds, a type of remix that I have yet to encounter properly analyzed in any of the above literature. These remixes typically do not involve the rearranging/rupture/cutting up that forms the primary focus of remix studies. On a typical hip-hop remix, the original artist performs a different verse than what was on the original recording, and the track usually features guest artists. Sometimes the beat is different, but not always. Bad Boy Records was notorious for remixes. 112's "Only You" remix featuring Biggie Smalls and Mase (1996) and Puff Daddy's "All About The Benjamins (Remix)" (1997) both quickly come to mind, along with



Craig Mack's "Flava In Ya Ear" (1994). In R&B, remixes have often involved adding rappers to contribute a verse without necessarily changing the previously sung lyrics. The beats often change to sound more like hip-hop; that is to say that a song may go from being a ballad to suddenly having a strong snare backbeat indicative of rap. Remixing allowed sounds that would typically not be heard in contexts like the club to have new life; in a way, this does refer back to DJs and remixing. The association between DJ techniques and remixing is so strong that it is commonplace for a technical glitch, such as a CD skipping or an accidental scratch on a record to cause observers to loudly proclaim "REEEEMIX!", a nod to Kid Capri, Fatman Scoop, and other legendary figures who have proclaimed the word at the beginning of a musical track. Additionally, remix studies have a tendency to look at DJ culture in reference to remix, looking at the way they take and reshape the records they're spinning. But remixes in contemporary Black popular music typically involve the original artist behind the song simply making a new(ish) version of the song. Sometimes, that takes shape in the form of performing the same lyrics over a different beat, or style of music.<sup>103</sup> Remix also carries strong metaphorical connotations in hip-hop, particularly inside the subgenres of "trap" or "coke rap," serving as terminology for turning cocaine into crack on the stove.

The pervasive "Death On Me" remixes don't fit any of the above descriptions of remix; they don't follow standard hip-hop practice. Dex Osama is deceased, making him unable to consentingly participate,<sup>104</sup> though posthumous verses are not unheard of, i.e.

Notorious B.I.G.'s posthumous track "Dead Wrong" (1999). But the remixes do not feature

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<sup>103</sup> This isn't specific to Black popular music. Elvis Crespo's multiple remixes to "Suavemente" (1999) come to mind.

<sup>104</sup> The Haitian lore of the 'zombie' comes to mind, wherein an enslaved person who dies could be reanimated and forced to continue working. Though consent is a loaded term to use when considering enslavement, the parallelism here comes from the idea of being forced to labor and participate even after death.

Dex's voice or verses; it is not as if people are inserting themselves into his pre-recorded track. What the remixes have in common is their use of the beat, the instrumental track produced by RJ Lamont that provided the background for Dex's song. Producers typically have no control over what tracks are called once their beats are selected, so it is highly unlikely that RJ Lamont titled his track "Death On Me," if it was titled at all. The song took on its name because of Dex's lyrics and story. I am unclear whether RJ had produced the beat already and it was selected by Dex, or if RJ created it in the studio with Dex. Nevertheless, it is an interesting maneuver to consider your track a remix to an established song when truly you're only using the beat. Typically, rappers have considered such tracks "freestyles." A possibility for the tracks being termed remixes may be the perceived need to pay respect to or memorialize Dex. Almost every remix has "RIP Dex Osama" written multiple times in its comments section.

Some of the tracks do refer to Dex in other ways, like borrowing some of the lyrics, phrase lengths, rhyme schemes of the original track. Most are also recorded in a way that the vocals sound a bit eerie and echoey. The general spirit of the original song is gestured toward constantly; it is like his performance has haunted all of the reiterations. I am reminded of Stanyek and Piekut (2010) as they explore what it means to perform with the dead, with holograms, with people who cannot choose to perform with you. It is also strange for so many artists to try to borrow and take on what was a very specific story - "Death On Me" is about a conversation Dex had with *his* mother, and nightmares and visions *he* had. Hip-hop is often already laden with accusations of artists performing inauthentic stories.<sup>105</sup> The fact that Dex died in that way that he pre-echoed adds a bit of realness to his song that would

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<sup>105</sup> As if all art has to be realistic - a charge held to hip-hop by fans and the legal system that is not levied towards other styles of music.

seemingly be lost in these remixes, depending on the lives of the performers.

Dex's track is so haunting that the remixes all refer to themselves as "Death On Me" – there is an implicit understanding that the original song/beat are so iconic that it may be viewed as ignorant or disrespectful to go by other names. In the past, it was more common for two different rap songs to use the same beat.<sup>106</sup> Producers have the right to sell their beats to multiple performers, yet it is atypical for them to do so in contemporary hip-hop. Just as well, rappers would not want to use the same beat as someone else, because they don't want to be accused of biting, or just don't want the association with another artist and their previously recorded songs. All of these remixes are welcoming, even *forcing*, that association; this lends their stories a credence, a rap realness, because of Dex being deceased. He is inseparable from that RJ Lamont beat, so it would be impossible to create a song using the beat without being compared to Dex in the first place.

## **Haunting Silences**

A different producer tag sounds in the beginning of most of the remix videos, and I struggled to determine who that producer is - it was certainly not RJ Lamont. To my ear, it was one producer taking credit for another's work. Like an unethical palimpsest, they have supplanted RJ Lamont's producer tag with their own. Then, when artists seek out the instrumental to perform their own "remix," they may be finding this improperly credited version, leaving the original behind in a perverse sort of way. Searching on YouTube revealed the video "Dex Osama - Death On Me [Instrumental Remake] (Prod. by Exdeath908)." Written in the video's description, "OG Producer: RJ Lamont. Feel free to use this as long as you give credit. (Prod. by Exdeath908). There are a number of things to unpack from the video's title

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<sup>106</sup> This is markedly different from songs using the same sample – it is still quite common for a number of producers to use the same sample, and a producer's creativity is often judged on how different their "flip" of a particular sample sounds from other producers.

and description alone. To begin, the labeling of the track as an instrumental remake of Dex Osama raises questions of authorship and the nature of rap. It is not quite possible to create an instrumental remake of a rap song - at least not one that successfully contains all elements of the original. What the producer, Exdeath908, really means is that he has used a digital audio program to attempt to reconstruct the beat over which Dex Osama raps in "Death On Me." However, Dex Osama did not produce the beat; he is associated with the beat through the lyrics he delivered over them. Because producers often go uncredited, and because the beat may have a different name when unattached to the song written by the rapper that gets produced, it is common practice to refer to a producer's beat by naming the rapper and whatever song title they attached to the sounds. Exdeath908 goes on to name RJ Lamont as the "OG"<sup>107</sup> producer and then gives permission to use the remake he's constructed - whether or not he got permission to create this remake - as long as credit is given. But credit to whom - him, or RJ Lamont? Perhaps neither. The vast majority of the remixes do not explicitly credit either, though some leave behind a sonic artefact - the producer tag<sup>108</sup> "Exdeath on the beat" near the beginning of some of the remixes. The way that credit is given is through the naming of the songs as "Death On Me," consciously referring back to the original.

"Death On Me" is a song that cannot successfully be extracted from its context; in a way, the artists behind the remixes are predicting their own haunting by feeling they need to credit Dex and use the title. The song comes loaded with a well-known narrative; it carries significant baggage. His death makes commenters unable to just admit that they liked the beat and want to make their own song to it. So, in labeling what you do a "Death On Me"

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<sup>107</sup> Though this is an abbreviation of "Original Gangsta," 'OG' has become quotidian slang to refer to an original, or first version of something

<sup>108</sup> Producer tags are likely partially descended from DJ culture wherein the DJ would have a crowd chant their name, but also there as a means to self-cite when it's unlikely that a rapper will mention the producer.

remix, it is as if you've offered a slight appeasement to the gods, you've paid a small amount of homage. It is a remix of the word remix. They rap new lyrics on a beat that mostly sounds like the OG, so they're actually fairly removed from the original track, but they must acknowledge that they recognize the context in which the song was made. It is a thin version of an echo wherein the echo becomes quite refracted, bending and morphing into something else that only resembles the original because it deliberately asks you to think about the original through its name. An insufficient echo, this rupture is a space for haunting to occur.

The remake of RJ Lamont's beat, created by Exdeath908, contains even more spaces for haunting. In his desire to recreate a beat that truly spoke to him, he thought less about the remake's usability by emcees and more about recreating the beat to sound *exactly* like the beat he heard on the original recording of "Death On Me." The original recording, however, is tailored specifically to fit Dex's voice, his lyrics, and his flow. Beyond just the creation of the original beat, it had to be *engineered* to fit the vocal performance, to create a good song. A producer or audio engineer who has an ear for creativity and the desire to enhance the recording of a song will alter the beat, the sounds used, the effects. They make songs come to life. So, in the original recording of "Death On Me," there are a number of moments where the beat "drops out," or goes silent, leaving only the sound of Dex's voice and his echo. Those silences, so perfectly engineered, draw attention to specific lyrics in specific moments. They enhance the accents in his flow. Exdeath's remake contains the same silences, the same dropouts in the same places, but Dex's voice is no longer present. The silences in the remake refer directly to Dex. Traces of his voice are present in these silences. As various rappers use Exdeath's remade beat, they are being haunted by these silences, the sound of Dex's voice being absent. The vast majority of rappers who have used the remade beat do not consider

these silences when writing and performing their lyrics; or if they do, it does not come across in their performances, their delivery. They blaze through the silences with no pause, or are at a point in their lyrics where the emphasis is weak over the silences. They rap continuously through the chorus moment in the beat, giving no space for breath or contemplation or echo like there was in the original. It is almost what Walter Benjamin raised as a possibility: the further things get from the original, the more aura is lost. However, the aura is not lost. The aura is haunting each subsequent performance over the remade beat. Dex's ghost, his lyrics, and his flow speak through the silences of everyone's performances, even when unacknowledged by the remix performers.

## **Conclusion: Rest In Peace**

Through repetitions, reverberations, and echoes, ghosts are manifested in Detroit hip-hop. They arise through group performances of deadly songs, with community voices serving as embodied echoes of fallen performers. They exist in recordings, with delay effects drawing attention to and emphasizing bygone words; these delays allow performers to perform along with spectral versions of themselves. Though echoes typically imply temporality, a pastness that reverberates until eventually fading away, the recording of echoes creates a ghostly effect, the ability to recall bygone sounds whenever desired. In this sense, recorded echoes represent ghosts, a digitally created, controllable haunting.

Participants in the Detroit hip-hop scene call upon ghosts in numerous ways. In this chapter, I primarily explored the ways in which ghosts are conjured through encounters with the haunting song "Death On Me" by the late Dex Osama. Yet there are other ghostly occurrences in Detroit hip-hop, hauntologies built around the lives and deaths of three

influential Detroit hip-hop artists who passed away in the prime of their careers: J Dilla, Blade Icewood, and Proof. As I wrote in Chapter One, the three artists were the subject of memorializing portraits as part of the D-Cyphered exhibit that took place at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Though a museum attendee took issue with what he believed to be an omission of a tribute to Proof in the exhibit, the memorial was indeed present - in his own portrait, Detroit rapper Supa Emcee wears a shirt with “BIG PROOF FOREVER 1973-2006” prominently displayed in giant letters, displays his forearm tattoo of Proof, and is standing in front of a mural of Proof. While this portrait differed from the tributes to Dilla and Blade - each featured their respective mothers holding photographs of their late children - it echoed the sentiment held by people within the Detroit hip-hop scene that these men were to be memorialized and canonized. As I found through my field research, all three of these figures are conjured in distinct ways in the city.

Proof is recalled and memorialized through lyrics and lyrical shoutouts of “Rest In Peace, Big Proof,” similar to the message seen on Supa Emcee’s shirt. He is also frequently mentioned in the music of Eminem, his longtime best friend. A compilation video titled “RIP Big Proof - April 11 2006” was uploaded to YouTube on the 12th anniversary of his passing, and features audio snippets of 23 Eminem verses that have mentioned Proof since his passing. Some of the mentions memorialize through moments of jest: in the track “Won’t Back Down” from Eminem’s album *Recovery* (2010), Em raps “I’m the shit - why you think Proof used to call me ‘Doody’?” Eminem both names his fallen friend and waxes nostalgic over an old childhood nickname given to him by his friend. Most often, Eminem lyrically recalls Proof as a source of personal inspiration, guidance, and protection - similar to the way one may imagine a guardian angel. In this context, he occasionally refers to Proof by his

given birth name, DeShaun. In “Walk On Water,” a 2017 track featuring Beyonce, Eminem raps “But the only one who’s looking down on me that matters now’s DeShaun.” He wishes for his friend’s guidance in 2010’s “Talkin’ 2 Myself,” rapping, “But Proof isn’t here to see me through it, I’m in the booth, poppin’ another pill, tryna talk myself into it.” The most explicit connection to Proof as ghost comes in the track “Cinderella Man” from 2010’s *Recovery*, wherein Eminem raps, “And ain’t shit you can do but fear it, Proof is here in spirit / And I’m his spittin’ image, I mirror it when I stand near it.” Not only is he naming Proof as ghost, Eminem is performing ritual, gaining power through his connection to and mirroring/echoing of the ghost. This is similar to the group performance of “Death On Me” that occurred at TV Lounge, with attendees creating a sense of Detroit community and reifying their identities as Detroiters through the echoing of Dex Osama’s ghost.

Blade Icewood is memorialized through bodily performance at nearly every Detroit hip-hop function, from the smallest house parties to the biggest concerts. The dance carries many names: Blade Dance, Hit(ting) the Blade, Boss(ing) Up. It is typically performed by standing up straight and reaching up with both hands slightly above head level, turning the hands into fists (as if grasping two invisible handles pointing directly at one’s body), then pulling those fists downward while either leaning back slightly or bending forward slightly at the waist. It is performed in a repetitive manner, with the downward motion usually occurring on the two and four, or backbeat, of a song. The dance, created and popularized by Blade Icewood, was first seen on a large scale in the music video for his 2004 single “Boy Would You,” the chorus to which asks the question “Boy (boss up and get this money) would you (boss up and get this money)?” The dance is seen repeatedly throughout the video, performed by Blade and his crew in oversized t-shirts and basketball jerseys, fashion



indicative of early 2000s hip-hop. In thinking back on my time spent in Detroit, I began to realize that I had seen the dance at just about all of the shows and parties I attended. I've seen it performed by people in the crowd, and I've seen it performed by emcees while they're on stage. People were Hitting the Blade when I first heard "Death On Me;" the dance was often employed during the group performance of "Dipset Anthem" at The Beat Profile. The Blade Dance has become synonymous with Detroit; it is an embodied ritual performed by people in the city's hip-hop scene that signals group identity while memorializing the dead.

On both a local and global scale, J Dilla is the most frequently evoked of fallen Detroit hip-hop artists. Commemorating the month in which Dilla was both born and passed on, "Dilla Day" celebrations take place in February of every year in cities around the world from Tokyo, Japan, to Ghent, Belgium, to Omaha, Nebraska. In particular, if you are reading this in the US or Europe, it is likely that there is a Dilla Day celebration where you live, or close by. Dilla Days exist to celebrate the life and legacy of James Dewitt Yancey, better known as J Dilla, and to give thanks for his contributions to hip-hop, R&B, and neo soul. They typically consist of DJs spinning his music, dancing, and live rap performances. I attended various types of Dilla Day celebrations in Detroit. Some boasted star-studded lineups and were filled with energetic performances and passionate tributes to Jay Dee. Others seemed fairly distant from J Dilla and his music, save for occasional shoutouts of "Make some noise for J Dilla!" spoken by DJs or emcees as they finished their sets - perhaps they were dedicating their various performances to him. His face appears on numerous murals throughout Detroit, and hardly a day passes in the city without seeing someone wearing a t-shirt bearing his name. The city takes pride in the fact that one of their own became arguably the most influential, respected hip-hop producer in the world. His shadow

looms so large over global hip-hop that one would be hard-pressed to find a working producer who would not mention him as an influence, even if only to check a symbolic box of acknowledgment - to not mention Dilla would be a tacit admission that one is not serious about the craft of making hip-hop. Known for an oozing, unquantized<sup>109</sup> sound, Jay Dee pioneered a sound that is still being imitated (to varying degrees of success) to this day. YouTube is full of tutorials on how to create a “J Dilla style beat,” and the fact that they are all different is testament to just how difficult it is to pin down his technique. In 2016, his uncle Herman Hayes, or “Uncle Herm,” opened Dilla’s Delights, a downtown bakery serving up Dilla’s favorite food: donuts.<sup>110</sup> Many of the flavors offered in the shop bear the names of his track titles, or other things closely associated with him. I participate in memorializing Jay Dee every year on his birthday (February 7) by purchasing a donut from a local shop wherever I happen to be, going to a peaceful location, listening to *Donuts* (2006), and eating while I reflect on the affect his music produces in me. I also play *Donuts* when I first move in to a new space, my sonic version of marking a space as my home. All of these acts, from my silly personal rituals to the biggest Dilla Day celebrations, demonstrate an impetus to keep Dilla’s spirit and legacy alive and a desire to pay respects to a spirit that still does so much work in the world.

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<sup>109</sup> In beatmaking, quantization is the digital process of shifting sound samples to fit perfectly on an unwavering tempo grid. It is generally applied when producers attempt to use digital samplers to add drums to a track and feel that their performance is too out-of-time to be acceptable for their project. Quantization adds a certain rigidity to a beat, it is commonly heard in the “Boom Bap” style of hip-hop most closely associated with 90s New York hip-hop. By not quantizing his drums, Dilla created beats that often had a disorienting, human, drunken feel to them.

<sup>110</sup> J Dilla’s final album, *Donuts*, was produced almost entirely during his extended hospital stays to treat his rare blood disorder while in Los Angeles. The album begins with an “Outro” and ends with an “Intro” that flow seamlessly into one another, signifying a loop - or donut. The album was released on Dilla’s 32nd birthday, February 7, 2006. He passed on three days later.

Echoes are a way of bringing pastness into present, of living and interacting with the dead. In Detroit, a city so often declared dead, the ability to mobilize death in such productive ways is integral to Black life. Death pronouncements lead to eventual invisibility, a curse that falls upon the forgotten. Conjuring ghosts allows residents of the city to take up real space, and to fight against displacement, even after the space is declared dead.

# Conclusion: Futures

## Detroit City Futures

In 2010, the Detroit Works Project was launched by the City of Detroit, a few local philanthropic organizations (most notably the Kresge Foundation), and the administration of the city's mayor at the time, Dave Bing, who had been elected the year prior. The project's goal was to create a blueprint for Detroit's future that addressed the physical, social, and economic landscape of the city. The details of the plan, however, were not made transparent to the city's residents, and the project began to receive criticism and resistance, with citizens casting doubt on the project that they felt was being kept secret, for nefarious reasons. Notably, citizens wariness in regard to the project began to rise due to the mayor's frequent invocation of "rightsizing," without offering explanation of what he meant by it, or how it would be implemented (Montgomery 2020). At issue was the number of vacant lots and the sheer amount of empty space that existed within Detroit's 139 square miles. Detroiters feared that rightsizing could mean anything from the throttling of city services to citizens living in areas of high vacancy to forced relocation. In September 2010, Detroit Works launched a series of public forums, in an effort to assuage fears that the foundations funding the project already had a plan they would implement without input from Detroiters (Montgomery 2020: 175). The first of these forums did little to calm public nerves – people were placed into brainstorming groups and told by the mayor that he wanted to hear their ideas, as he had no plan. The following forums saw a format change - meetings became a speech delivered by Mayor Bing, followed by a Q&A session - and a change in language from Bing; rather than rightsizing, he began to speak of people in "desolate areas" obtaining "better situations" (ibid: 178). The overall opaqueness

of the plan led to public outcry, which in turn caused the Bing administration to slow its efforts. The slow pace of the project led to internal disagreements between the Kresge Foundation and the City of Detroit, and in 2011, Detroit Works was split into two teams: a short-term team led by city officials, meant to address immediate city problems and conduct demonstration projects; a long-term team led by private consultants, meant to create a fifty-year plan for the city (ibid: 191). This fissure meant that city officials were no longer at the helm of planning Detroit's future. 2012-2013 brought large structural changes to the city. Mayor Bing, having lost a great deal of power to the state appointed emergency manager Kevyn Orr (see Chapter One) and facing low approval ratings, decided not to run for reelection. He was succeeded by Mayor Mike Duggan, who remains in office as of 2020. Duggan became the first white mayor of Detroit since the 1970s. The city filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in the history of the US. In the midst of all of this change, the Detroit Works Project released a 761-page guiding document known as the Strategic Framework, and rebranded itself in a way deemed more suitable to the project's goals: Detroit Future City.

According to the Detroit Future City (DFC) website, the Strategic Framework is a "shared vision for Detroit's future," and is the "result of a massive, citywide public-engagement effort." They present the document as a "blueprint for Detroit's future," noting that it contains "ideas, strategies, and approaches on how to best use the city's abundance of land, create job growth and economic prosperity, ensure vibrant neighborhoods, build an infrastructure that serves citizens at a reasonable cost, and maintain the high level of community engagement integral to the long-term revitalization of Detroit ([detroitfuturecity.com/strategic-framework/](http://detroitfuturecity.com/strategic-framework/))." The Strategic Framework is

centered around a civic engagement chapter that follows five primary sections, referred to as “Planning Elements”: Economic Growth, Land Use, City Systems, Neighborhoods, and Land and Building Assets. Each of these element sections is broken down even further into four subsections: Transformative Ideas, Realities, Imperatives, and Strategies/Implementation. Flipping through the document, one will find ruminations on the city’s land and citizens, numerous charts and graphs, color-coded historical timelines and flowcharts, and an emphasis on plain, jargon-free language. I have looked through the Strategic Framework an untold number of times since my first trip to Detroit in 2014. My frequent returns to this document have given me two main observations - the Strategic Framework is an overwhelmingly neoliberal capitalist plan, and it does not appear that Detroit’s most vulnerable are being helped by the framework. That Detroit Future City relies on the logics of neoliberal capital is unsurprising, as neoliberal capitalism is the system in power. Vacant lots and empty buildings are referred to as “assets,” everyone involved in the project from the board of DFC, to private investors, community leaders, and residents of Detroit is referred to as a “stakeholder.” Yet the people who have the most at stake - marginalized communities, residents of areas with high vacancy and inadequate city services - appear to have gained the least from the Strategic Framework. It is referred to as a shared vision for the city’s future, one that DFC professes came together through the aforementioned public forums, input from over 100,000 Detroiters, stakeholders, etc. Yet my conversations with Detroiters, my own observations from living in and repeatedly traveling to Detroit, and numerous journal articles, newspaper articles, and book chapters have shown that implementation of the Strategic Framework has primarily focused on the area from Arts Center to Downtown, the 7.2 square mile area known as Greater

Downtown. While some changes have happened in the neighborhoods in Detroit, they have largely been greening efforts, like creating parks, bike trails, or gardens. A *Bridge Detroit* article from October 13, 2020 begins:

Detroit's youth want safe neighborhoods, a quality education, and access to fresh and healthy food. Why wouldn't they? These basic requests should be the standard. However, in Detroit — where the median household income is nearly half that of the metro area's — youth say economic equity doesn't yet exist (Lewis 2020).

The article goes on to repeat the DFC language about a shared vision, quote DFC staff members who were both surprised and impressed by Detroit youth being civic-minded and articulate about their desire for stable housing and quality education, and mention the importance of community voices. It does not address the fact that the concerns expressed by these youth are the same concerns marginalized Detroiters have expressed for decades while their neighborhoods have undergone divestment. An uptick in investment in the city center has further exposed the income inequality chasm in Detroit, as most neighborhoods continue to decline. Perhaps almost a decade of Detroit Future City is not enough time to adequately judge their progress. After all, they did set out to create a fifty-year plan for the city. At the same time, it is clear that neighborhoods have not been the priority over the span of this project to this point. It is largely unclear how the city will look in the future, if the Strategic Framework continues to be the guiding document for the city, and continues to be implemented in the same way. One thing that seems clear from this is that there will be a lot of greenspace.

## **Toward a Black Sound Studies**

Historically, music has often been the entry point for talking about Black sound. Given the ubiquity of musical contributions from Africa and its diaspora, and the way that they

have shaped much of the world's popular music, this is not terribly surprising. Though I have spent some time writing about sound more broadly, most of this project has been about music. Yet as Sound Studies has become ever more coherent as a cohesive field over the past two decades, it has become apparent to a number of scholars, myself included, that there are many opportunities to talk about Black sounds, voices, echoes, techniques of listening, silence, and the like, providing opportunities to understand Black life outside of cultural creation or production. I have strategically positioned myself in the middle of a still coalescing world of Sound Studies, being contacted to serve on advisory boards, asked to contribute articles to special issues of journals, asked to speak or moderate panels. This is mostly in reaction to my 2017 article in *Current Musicology's* special issue on Black Sound Studies, in which I focused on the racialization of mobile listening devices, but also discussed Black techniques of listening and silence. Yet I get the sense that my phone has stayed ringing, so to speak, because of recent calls across the humanities to "decolonize" fields, or to contend with their focus on whiteness. In a 2015 post to the online journal *Sounding Out!*, Gus Stadler provides a brief summary of a few recent textbook-style publications in Sound Studies to essentially say that they are very useful, but continue to center whiteness like the majority of academia. He says that when race is mentioned in these works, it is usually lacking a deeper analysis of race's role in sound, and that it appears to be part of a "liberal politics of representation or inclusion (Stadler 2015)." While this is more or less true, and could be said about so many fields, I also find it a banal statement. Yes, there are not many works on sound and race within the field of Sound Studies proper; there are also not many people of color working within Sound Studies. I don't know that



including more works focused on race will solve the issue that Stadler seems most concerned with, which is a lack of representation in the field, and the centering of whiteness in the field. However, it seems that that is the approach being taken, which, ironically, can feel a bit like being a part of a “liberal politics of representation or inclusion” when you’re on this end of the email requests. I’m more interested in addressing what I see as a root cause of Stadler’s identified problem as I enter my career: the centering of academia in knowledge production. I believe a Black Sound Studies can be instrumental in reorienting academia to be *for* the people, rather than interpretations *of* the people that are only read by other academics.

I have never considered myself a scholar, primarily because of notions of a separation between working class and some elite academic class that has been overimagined and overstated by media and a growing anti-intellectual movement that has subconsciously influenced my self-perception. I also found that people’s behavior around me and treatment of me changed when they learned that I was not a bartender/musician, but a bartender/musician earning a doctorate and writing a dissertation. I find myself reinforcing this socially-constructed divide, wanting to be perceived more as a bartender than an academic. My subject position is constantly intertwined with my work, beyond the typical way that people associate with things that they create. Every time I write about race - which is central to all of my work - I write about myself. Even when writing about very individual Black experiences, it is difficult to separate myself, due to so many shared Black experiences, cultural memory, and a constant subconscious pull to help, serve, elevate, and amplify the voices of other marginalized people. This is where I feel Black Sound Studies can make an intervention beyond Sound Studies and Music Studies and can

tap into the spirit of fields with activist roots, for instance Black Studies or Gender Studies. I am interested in pushing through my focus on music to discover Black ways of listening, reverberating, sounding, echoing, being silent; I think that the definitions should be malleable, determined by the people engaging in these activities, and useful to the people. I am interested in a Black Sound Studies with its own methodologies and terms, a coherent field that is interdisciplinary, but does not rely on comparisons to other fields to be viewed as relevant. There is already a good amount of work that could be considered canonical in the formation of a Black Sound Studies - Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies* (2005), Michael Veal's *Dub* (2007), Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012), and Gaye Theresa Johnson's *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity* (2013) are a few that come to mind. In Gus Stadler's charge, he asserts that it is imperative Sound Studies scholars consider the ways in which race indelibly shapes the way we think about sound. While this is very much true, even in the books that I mentioned, I actually see a reconfiguration of Stadler's assertion: I think that these books also show the way that sound shapes the way we think about race. I find it necessary to look in both directions when talking about sound and race, and Black Sound Studies would be well-equipped to do so.

## **The Future of Detroit Hip-Hop**

I entered the lobby of the Penobscot Building, a 45-floor skyscraper in Downtown Detroit that was one of the tallest buildings in the world when it was completed in 1928. Built in the Art Deco style like many of the city's buildings, there are sharp lines and shiny surfaces everywhere, from the light fixtures to the tiles on the floor. After a brief moment of taking in the opulence of the space, I approached a security guard seated behind a

reception desk.

“Who you here to see?”

“Nick Speed.”

“He expecting you?”

“Yeah, he knows I’m coming.”

“Elevators to your left.

The elevator doors are golden. I nervously began my ascent, perplexed at how quickly I’d been granted access to this space, as I’d only been in contact with Nick for a few days. I’d gotten his number from a friend I made at a conference in Germany; while she lived in Berlin at the time, she is a native Detroiter and knows a number of people in the scene. It took months for me to work up the nerve to reach out to him - I felt a bit awkward about getting his contact info from someone else and reaching out to him out of the blue. My consternation proved to be unnecessary:

What’s good, Nick Speed! My name is Alex, I’m a  
friend of [mutual friend]. She gave  
me your number a while back but I just now got  
back to the city after a couple months of  
traveling. Anyway, I’m a PhD student studying  
Detroit  
hip-hop, gentrification, geography.... Basically  
the conditions that led to the current state of  
Detroit and Detroit hip-hop, and the ways that  
artists use and create space and the city. I was  
hoping we Could link up and chat some time?

Sep 11, 8:23 PM

Sounds good Alex

Sep 11, 8:24 PM

Dope! Any shows coming up this week, or times  
Where I could come through?

Sep 11, 8:26

PM Sure Detroit is the new black on Woodward on  
Thursday eve after 5:30

Sep 11, 8:27 PM

Bet

Sep 11, 8:27 PM

I'll come through and introduce myself  
Sep 11, 8:27 PM

Cool thx  
Sep 11, 8:28 PM|

Though thrilled at the quickness of his responses, I was also shaken by the brevity, anxious that I was potentially annoying a stranger. Three days later, I made myself as presentable as I could, wanting to make a good first impression on Nick and whomever else might be in the building. I arrived at the storefront for the Detroit fashion brand *Détroit is the New Black* shortly after 6 PM to find it full of people mingling, drinking cocktails, and perusing the clothing selection. Just off to the side of the entrance stood Nick Speed, hard at work in the makeshift DJ booth. Once he reached a less-active moment in his set, I walked up to him to introduce myself. “Yo. Alex,” I said, gesturing to myself hoping he would make the connection to our text conversation. “Whatupdoe, Alex? Why don’t you come through the new studio next week?” We settled on which day, dapped each other up, and I was on my way - a fieldwork encounter that lasted a literal five minutes.

I reached my floor, about halfway up the tower, and stepped out of the elevators to see windows providing a stunning overlook of the Detroit River and the TCF Center, Detroit’s primary convention space. The hallway seemed quiet, until I approached the studio door and started to hear a rhythmic thud. I lifted my hand and placed it against the door, preparing to knock; my knuckles vibrated as the thud from the studio was knocking before I could. I decided to walk back over to the window and text to announce my arrival. A minute later, Speed emerged from the studio. With a big smile on his face, he greeted me and invited me in. I thanked him for his willingness to open his space to me and to talk to me; he responded, almost incredulously, to my gratitude:

*It’s all love, bruh! You show the city love and it shows love back.*

I'm not sure how many times I've been to his studio at this point. I went numerous times while living in Detroit, and I typically make it up there once or twice every time I return to the city. These trips to the studio have given me an important vantage point when it comes to observing the city's future. The studio's windows look out onto the city, and I have watched the landscape change as new structures are built and others are levelled to make space. I've watched major thoroughfares get the repair they have needed for years, as the city council and corporate entities rush to make the streets match the aesthetic of a "New Detroit." But beyond these topographical changes, the soundscape of Detroit is also changing, and artists like Nick Speed have been actively involved in imagining Detroit futures, and Black futures, through their music making.

In many Detroit hip-hop circles, Speed is nicknamed the "Mayor of Detroit." I got the sense that the nickname had a lot to do with his big, extroverted personality, his charm, and his people skills. After a couple of trips to his studio, I realized that it was also because of his vast network, his seemingly endless connections within the city's hip-hop community. Of my visits to the studio, very few of them have consisted of just me and Nick in the space. As one of the city's most celebrated producers and emcees, he stays incredibly busy - mostly with recording projects, mixing, and production. I soon found it advantageous to be there as often as possible, to pick his brain and to meet the various Detroit emcees who would pass through - I wouldn't have to ask Nick for numbers, I could just get contacts directly from sources or interview people in the studio. Whenever someone would come into the studio, no matter how famous, how veteran to the scene, what style of hip-hop they made, or how nervous I was, Speed would always introduce me in the same sort of way:

*Yo, this is my man Alex. He's writing a book about us.*

Beyond the fact that it demonstrates Nick's trust in and endorsement of me and my work, I find a lot of beauty in being introduced this way. For one, it immediately piques the interest of whomever I'm meeting. People have responded in various ways: extreme zeal ("Dope! You tryna get my picture for the cover?"); approval ("Bet!"); acknowledgement ("Word."); incredulity ("Word?"); and measured skepticism ("About us? Why?"). In every instance, it gave me the opportunity to talk about the work I was trying to do and how people could participate in it. Additionally, it demonstrates Nick's view of a collective Detroit hip-hop community, more closely linked than I typically envision. I briefly alluded to this in my first chapter, mentioning that Nick's DJ sets were often not bound by a specific style of hip-hop; he was far more interested in playing as many Detroit examples as he could, regardless of style, as long as he could keep the party rocking. His shout-outs of "all Detroit music!" while DJing showed his pride in the city, and his diverse network of Detroit artists and styles. But it also demonstrates his ongoing desire to connect the city's hip-hop community, and to constantly create new pathways for the city's artists. This is exemplified by his double album inspired by the DIA's art exhibit and bearing the same name: *D-Cyphered*. The album consists of 39 tracks, all produced and arranged by Nick Speed, and features over sixty artists from the Detroit hip-hop scene. The rappers are representative of numerous Detroit styles, making the album play like an audio buffet - chances are, if you like hip-hop, there's something in there you can enjoy.

I heard the album coming together before I realized it. On some of my first trips to the studio, I would text to ask Nick what he was up to, and he would tell me he was up in the 'stu,' that he was 'cooking.' When I'd arrive, he'd be in the middle of practicing for

upcoming sets, or just listening to a lot of different music. Many of our conversations happened with me on the couch while he stood behind the deck, playing a full DJ set. He would practice weaving in and out of soul, disco, hip-hop, jazz, looking for interesting sonic connections and tempos that flowed consistently. During one of my first interactions with Speed, we started talking about the city's music while he was in the middle of playing a techno track produced by Robert Hood, a founding member of Detroit musical collective Underground Resistance who is considered one of the forefathers of Detroit techno.

**Nick Speed:** Yeah man. Detroit music is great, man. I don't know if it's just like--cuz I don't even know Robert Hood, you know what I'm sayin? But...it's just a sweet ass song--

**Me:** (laughing, interjecting) Word...

**NS:** --from Detroit! It's like when I hear it's from Detroit, it's like..yeah. I like that.

His pride in the city's music extended beyond the associations with place and identity that are prominent for many people in hip-hop communities around the globe. He was also proud because of his pride in Black music, and his association of Detroit with Blackness. Shortly after telling me that he likes music when he hears that it is from Detroit, we began to talk about Detroit's music history, then music history more generally, talking specifically about African and African American contributions. He told me "damn near all the music is Black music, for real," noting that the original people came from the African continent, and the continent's influence on music cannot be diminished. His mixes came into immediate clarity for me from that moment on. Nick Speed plays Detroit music; Detroit music is Black music.

There is a moment that remains at the forefront of my mind when I think about my time in the studio with Nick Speed. We had been talking about his history as a producer, and I took a moment to show that I was a student of the music to mention some of my

favorite beats that he'd produced - 50 Cent's "What If" (2005), and Danny Brown's "Detroit 187" (2011). He was humble and deflected the praise a bit, then moved over to sit in front of his computer and beat production station. He played a number of beats, including the two that I had mentioned. I asked him:

**Me:** What's your favorite beat that you've made?

**NS:** Man, I gotta pick *one*?!

**Me:** ...or like, something you made recently that you fuck with *heavy*.

**NS:** Oh. I got something for you.

He grinned, turned to his computer to locate the file, then pressed play. The beat began with a vocal sample repeating the word [redacted] over soulful chords being played on what sounded like a Hammond B3 organ. Shortly thereafter, a synth bass entered to provide low end, and add to the rhythmic structure. All of the components built in intensity, giving a double-time feel to the beat. Suddenly, the drop: drums in a half-time feel that completely came as a surprise after feeling everything twice as fast. My eyes widened as I struggled to express my joy at the sounds I was hearing. Eventually, after expressing my disbelief at how great it sounded, I asked him for what song he'd created the beat. Wryly, he replied "I can't tell you what it's for yet, you'll have to wait and see." I have asked him to play that beat every time I've gone to the studio since, and I'm still waiting to see what it is for. I'm sure I'll ask him to play it next time I visit.



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